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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Fan TL Release

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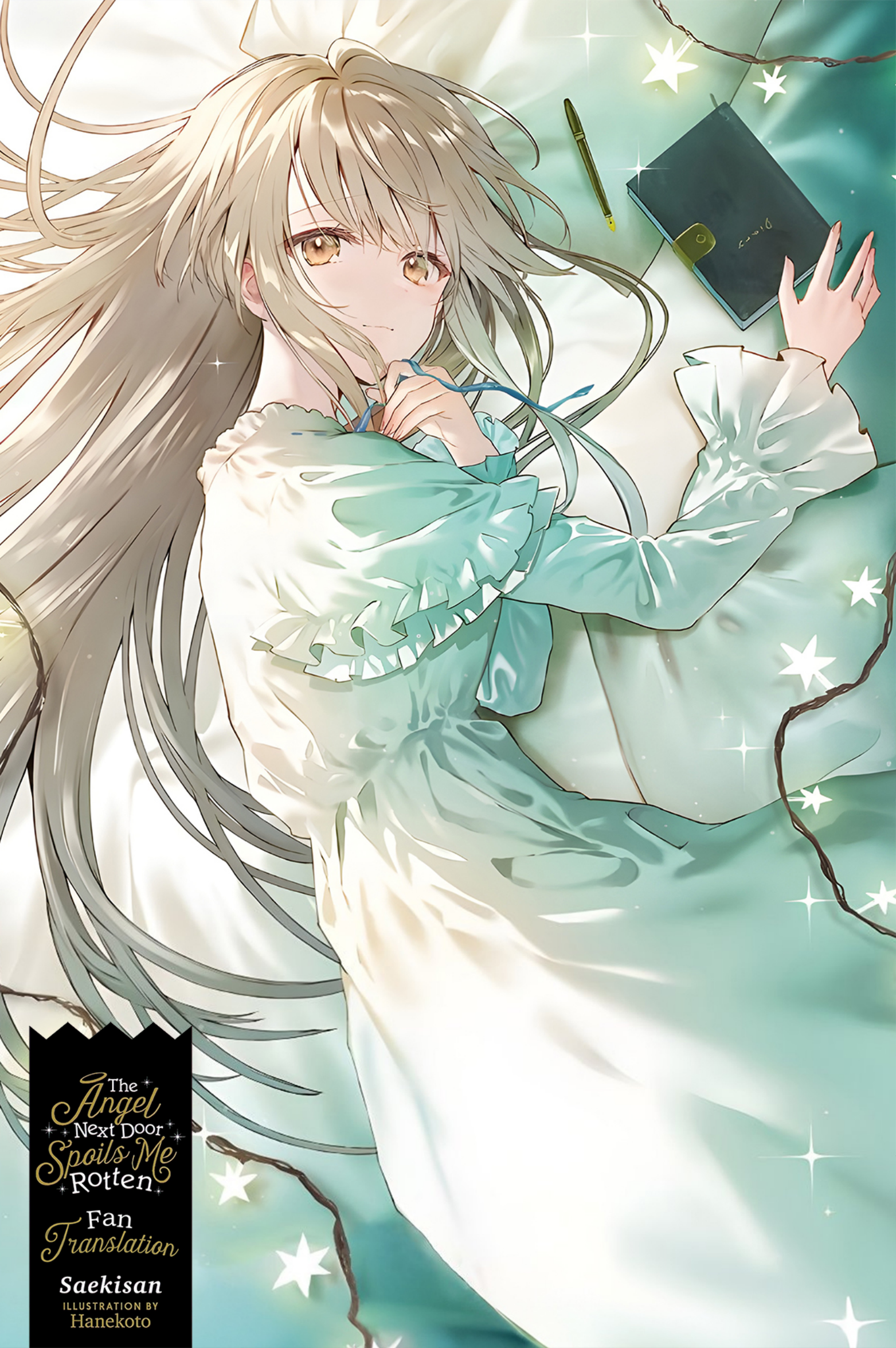
The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten
Fan Translation
Saekisan
ILLUSTRATION BY
Hanekoto

“I thought I should record what happened today while it’s still fresh in my mind.”

“L-Let’s go with the cardigan today...”

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The Angel Next Door Can't Release Me

Amane Fujimiya

A second-year high school student who lives next door to his girlfriend—an angel. He has grown closer to her over the past year, discovering more and more about her as they experience many loving memories together.

Mahiru Shiina

A second-year high school student who lives next to her beloved. With the exception of sleeping, she is almost always at her boyfriend's place and regularly prepares his meals. Loves Amane from the bottom of her heart.

The Angel Next Door Fan TL Release

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

Vol. 8.5 Special Edition: NextDoorTL

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The Angel Next Door
Spoils Me Rotten

Otonari no Tenshi-sama ni Itsunomanika Dame Ningen ni Sareteita Ken

Vol. 8.5 Fan Translation

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The Path Walked Thus Far

The tip of the pen glided over paper, producing a somewhat stuttering shushing sound as it filled the blank page with letters.

Trying not to look at the words being written by Mahiru's delicate fingertips and thin ballpoint pen, Amane glanced over at her. She sat next to him, silently filling part of a thick book with ink.

After dinner, once the cleaning was done, Amane and Mahiru would relax together. However, that didn't mean they were always glued to each other. Even their classmates—and amusingly enough, Itsuki—misunderstood that. It seemed that people thought Amane and Mahiru were flirting with each other around the clock.

In reality, it couldn't be further from the truth. They each did what they had to do independently. They weren't constantly working together or watching over each other. Though they shared the same space, they spent their time doing their preferred activities, passing the time peacefully. Today was no exception. Despite securing her spot next to Amane, Mahiru had kept to her own task, quietly writing something.

Amane didn't try to peek at what she was writing. Even for lovers, it would be rude to do so. Still, he could tell that she was writing something. She had previously written summaries and evaluations for recipes, but this didn't seem to be that kind of notebook. At a glance, it appeared to be a fancier book with a leather cover.

"What are you writing?" he asked.

While he did feel bad for potentially disturbing her, Amane was unable to resist his curiosity seeing her so focused on writing. Mahiru immediately looked up, showing a puzzled expression.

She then noticed Amane's gaze wandering around her hands and grasped his thoughts. "Ah. This… I suppose you could call this a diary? I thought I should record what happened today while it's still fresh in my mind."

"Ohh," Amane replied, "that's diligent—or should I say prudent—of you."

He wondered what she was writing, and it turned out to be a diary. Indeed, upon hearing her response, the book in front of her did look the part. It wasn't pretty or cute, as one might expect a high-school girl to like. Rather, it was something sturdy and weighty, which was very much like Mahiru.

It looked carefully maintained, with no noticeable wear, but it also seemed like it had some history to it. It definitely didn't look like something she had recently started using.

"Do you write in it every day?" Amane asked.

"No, not that frequently. Only when something happens. I suppose you could call it a habit of mine I've had since I was little…"

"Well isn't that nice? If you record what happened each day, you'll have an easier time recalling it later down the line."

"Yes. For better or worse," Mahiru emphasized.

Amane didn't keep a diary per se, but if there were something worth noting, he would jot it down quickly in his smartphone's scheduling app. It often came in handy when looking back later.

"I consider it a good way to sort out emotions and memories," Mahiru began to explain. "By recording my experiences here, I can quickly recall past events. I even wrote about when we first met…well, when we first spoke."

"I'm betting you wrote something like 'What's up with this guy?'"

Their first real conversation had taken place on the day he'd handed her an umbrella. Looking back, he realized he hadn't left the best first impression. His attitude was hesitant and his tone was curt. Mahiru had likely had similar thoughts at the time.

While Mahiru hadn't said much of anything herself, she had been alone in that park that day following a rough interaction with her mother. It was only natural that she hadn't been in the best mood when a complete stranger approached her at that time, with a blunt way of speaking no less.

Could I not have done anything to better my attitude?

The more he ruminated on it, the more regret began to wash over him. But Mahiru looked over and chuckled upon seeing his face.

“Hehe. I won’t deny that, but it wasn’t a negative feeling either. I was more surprised than anything. And I had seen how aloof you acted in school, so I sort of knew what to expect. Plus, it didn’t seem like you had ulterior motives when you offered me the umbrella.”

“It worked out well then, I suppose?”

“Yes. In fact, I felt safer because you acted that way…it’s unsettling when a total stranger suddenly acts kind to you, don’t you think? It’s frightening to have someone you don’t know try stepping into your life like that.”

“Well, I do also think so, yeah.”

For Mahiru at that point in her life, trusting others must have been a difficult task. Because she understood her own value and standing, she seemed to always keep others at arm’s length, never allowing them to get close.

“In the end, the attitude you held became the foundation for me to trust you—it helped me build the confidence that it was okay for me to get involved with you. So it wasn’t a bad thing.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but I think I could’ve approached it differently or phrased things better, you know,” Amane admitted, aware of how unsociable he used to be.

However, Mahiru simply chuckled. “I won’t deny that your stern face and aloofness were quite pronounced back then, Amane-kun.”

“Sorry for that.”

Mahiru giggled elegantly. “I’m not blaming you,” she said, covering her mouth delicately while letting out a soft, almost whispered laugh. Amane couldn’t help sending a glare her way, but Mahiru’s smile only deepened further. He turned his head away in defeat.

Her laughter continued, but the teasing had stopped. Back when he first met her, Mahiru had her share of difficulties, so a little teasing didn’t bother Amane in the slightest. Still, that wasn’t to say he enjoyed it. With a small sigh, he lightly ran his fingertips down her back in revenge. He could feel her body briefly shiver in response.

However, Mahiru didn’t seem to mind and gently tapped Amane’s thigh with her hand as if to retaliate. Then she returned to her diary, her pen gliding smoothly over the page again. Amane couldn’t help but wonder if she was writing about their little exchange just now.

He felt complicated, imagining future Mahiru teasing him about what she'd written. Still, he had no right to stop her and remained silent, watching with pursed lips as she happily continued writing in her well-worn journal.

She didn't write every day, nor did she fill an entire page each time. But the aged leather cover was a testament to her long-standing habit. Judging by the number of pages that seemed to be filled—about two-thirds—it was clear that she'd been keeping that diary for years. That collection of pages had grown alongside Mahiru on her journey, both in number and maturity.

"Are you curious?" Mahiru asked as she tilted her head, noticing Amane's gaze as he observed her pen glide across the page.

"Weeell, to say I'm not curious would be a lie, but I imagine those are personal memories and emotions you've chosen to record. Both the good and the bad. If you don't want anyone else to see them, I won't force the issue."

Amane considered himself somewhat possessive, but that didn't mean he had the right to tie someone down solely based on his feelings. He didn't intend to harm his partner for the sake of prioritizing his emotions, nor did he believe that knowing everything was necessarily a good thing. It was solely Mahiru's choice to share or withhold that part of her. He had no say in that.

"I'm sure there could be things you want to keep secret, and I don't really think I should read those… Just because I'm your lover doesn't mean I have the right to pry into everything. Everyone has a thing or two they'd rather keep to themselves."

"Amane-kun, you're so understanding that it can be almost troublesome at times."

"Come on now." Amane felt as though she didn't believe him, and he was perplexed by her reaction. But understanding that her astonishment wasn't meant in a derogatory way, he chose not to complain further.

"…I'm not you, Mahiru, so I can't know everything there is to know about you, nor do I think I need to. You have your own life, and your own privacy."

"Hehe, I understand…but don't you ever get curious simply for the sake of it?"

"…I don't feel the need to pry. As long as you can tell me things you are comfortable sharing, I'm satisfied." As Amane steadfastly showed respect for her wishes, Mahiru made a "Hmm" sound and began to flip through her journal.

“When you mention things I ‘want to share’, it’s difficult to answer,” Mahiru noted.

Pages of Mahiru’s life, documented by her delicate fingertips, turned one by one with a flick—each one revealing and then hiding letters that appeared slightly rounder than they were now, clearly written by a child.

“It isn’t as though I’m writing anything interesting. It’s not even like a diary—it’s more like just a simple record—like a report of sorts. I suppose the most diary-like entries were the ones written during my time in middle school. Emotionally speaking, I was relatively immature, so whenever something bad happened, I poured everything I felt dissatisfied with into my diary instead of mulling it over in my head.”

“If doing that makes you immature, then people who lash out aggressively must be infants or something.”

“Well, there are moments when people are unable to control their own emotions and direct their frustrations at others,” Mahiru began to elaborate, “and it’s hard to deny that they are behaving like a child, wishing for others to cheer them up.”

“Harsh but definitely true…I’ll be mindful of that.”

“Why do you look so downhearted after hearing that, Amane-kun?”

“No, it’s just—I feel like I might have a similar side to me, is all.”

Amane generally wasn’t the type to get angry easily, and he rarely spent enough time with others to have the opportunity to lash out. However, he took a moment now to consider the possibility that he might be taking out his frustrations on others without realizing sometimes.

People often aren’t aware of it themselves when they do it, so he felt that being cautious could serve as a safeguard, both for the present and the future. Mahiru seemed to ponder this for a moment, seemingly in deep thought.

“Amane-kun throwing a tantrum…that sounds nice.”

“Well, it shouldn’t!”

“I’m half-kidding.”

“Only half, huh.”

“Well, I imagine it would be fresh and cute.”

“No matter how you slice it, reacting that way would just be emotional abuse. I highly doubt it’d be ‘cute’ at all…”

Just imagining himself throwing a tantrum and directing it at Mahiru made Amane feel nauseous. It might be considered cute for a child, but Amane's appearance, though somewhat youthful, was close to that of a respectable adult, and he certainly tried to act like an adult as much as possible.

No one would want to see such a person scream and shout simply because they weren't getting their way. Mahiru probably didn't really want to see Amane express his emotions so openly. She most likely would not approve of any truly un-adultlike behavior.

"Anyway, Amane-kun. I don't think you are the type to take out your frustrations on other people. After all, you can be rather self-deprecating. You even belittle yourself often, and get discouraged without anyone being the wiser, don't you?"

"Ugh."

"And when something bad happens, you genuinely feel sorrowful and even tend to blame yourself for it. Even if the other person was to be utterly in the wrong, you would still focus on your own shortcomings."

"…There's rarely ever a time where the other person is one hundred percent at fault," Amane pointed out. As Mahiru said, Amane tended to shrink away, thinking that maybe the fault lay with him—even if not to the point of total withdrawal.

"Even if it's not one hundred percent, there are plenty of times when ninety-nine point nine percent of the fault lies with the other person, you know?"

"Well, maybe, but…"

"While I believe I'm the same type as you, I try to be more pragmatic about it. I reflect on my actions, yes, but I don't go beyond necessary apologies and introspection. I don't want to spend all my time mired in my guilt."

It was precisely because Mahiru could make such clear-cut judgments that she could conduct herself like that, and Amane found that enviable.

"Well, I say that now, but the old me hadn't been nearly as good at managing my emotions, and I lacked charm. I was far less skilled in the way I'd carried myself compared to now. It truly drives home just how young I was."

"Lacked charm, eh?"

"Why are you questioning that part?"

"What might this adorable bundle of cuteness be trying to imply?"

She seemed unaware of it herself, but her actions and words were so endearing that Amane couldn't help but wonder what on Earth she was talking about.

Mahiru seemed to think it was only natural for people to describe her behavior as the Angel as graceful or elegant, since it was intentional on her part. But when all that was stripped away and she was just Mahiru, alone with Amane, her behavior became *un*intentional.

Occasionally, she would act in a provocative manner, perhaps spurred on by a certain someone, but otherwise, Mahiru was just herself. The charming gestures and word choices that would seem calculated if done by someone else were, while terrifying in its innocent obliviousness, unconscious actions on Mahiru's part.

"Who do you think mentioned that I wasn't cute?" Mahiru queried, referencing a past exchange.

"That would be my ignorant past self," affirmed Amane immediately. He felt genuine regret for his prior judgment, and a sense of guilt resurfaced now that she had pointed it out.

"…As you once said, Amane-kun, I do think I lacked charm back then."

"Nah. If the *current* me saw the *past* you, I'd think you were incredibly cute."

"That would just be you looking at me through rose-tinted glasses, no?"

"I think you'd be cute even without them, like a hedgehog or something."

To Amane, who now knew Mahiru as she truly was, the Mahiru who refused to open her heart to anyone and had worn her Angel mask to keep people at a distance appeared like a hedgehog covered in countless spines.

Mahiru's Angel persona was a survival tactic that she used to protect herself emotionally, and although Amane had no intention of commenting on that, seeing how much more relaxed and affectionate the current Mahiru was made him doubt they were even the same person.

Amane had no intention of mocking her. He just found her irresistibly charming and cute, and relaxed into a smile. In contrast, irritated, Mahiru inflated her cheeks like a balloon in response to his remark.

That somewhat childish gesture was irresistibly cute, prompting Amane to add, "Now, you're like a squirrel." A light chop came flying into his side in response.

The way Mahiru expressed her dissatisfaction was, as always, charming.

Amane knew this behavior was reserved solely for him, which made it all the more special.

"…And now, you're acting like an honest, wistful kitten who wants to be spoiled, unlike how you were when we first met."

"…'Acting like a kitten'," she parroted. "Even though I'm unable to put on an 'act' anymore?"

"You no longer *need* to, right?"

It might be accurate to say that the need for her mask had disappeared. Mahiru no longer needed to put on an act around Amane. She allowed herself to express her soft side more often because she trusted that those around her would accept her unadorned self.

That trust, that affection which was directed towards him, made him happier than anything else.

"…I don't need to wear a façade when I'm with you, Amane-kun."

"You really weren't wearing it around me to begin with, even at the very start."

"Well excuse me."

"Sorry, sorry."

"…You may pat my head as an apology, you know?"

As Mahiru offered her head in anticipation of incoming pats, almost making Amane burst into laughter, he obligingly reached out his palm and stroked her silky hair. It was well-cared-for, as always, resembling flaxen threads, and felt incredibly smooth. Not only that, it also was fragrant, leaving a refreshing yet sweet scent in the air.

Running his fingers carefully through the cascading hair that fell over her shoulders, her disgruntled expression gradually softened as though oozing more and more happiness.

"Is this to your liking, my lady?"

"Indeed it is."

True to her word, Mahiru showed him an openly delighted expression, to which Amane couldn't help but imagine her with a tail and wagging it excitedly.

"Hmm, a cat? Maybe a dog…?"

"Did you say something?"

"Absolutely nothing."

Afraid that saying too much might spoil her mood, he swallowed his thoughts and continued to gently stroke Mahiru's head, who allowed the fawning. Accepting his touch, Mahiru seemingly ignored his earlier comment and gently leaned against him.

The diary had remained in her hand, asserting its presence.

"You don't need to continue writing?" Amane wondered.

"…After this, I intend to write about how Amane-kun once again treated me like an animal."

"But the future you is going to think I've been misbehaving, right?"

Mahiru giggled softly. "If you happen not to remember, you will likely question what you were doing."

Her description of the prior events had already been decided as Mahiru softly traced her finger along the diary to find where she left off.

"I want to create all kinds of memories. Like the diary I have kept so far, I want to collect and string them all together."

With that, Mahiru flipped through the pages again, gazing at the slightly faded letters, written in ink discolored by age, and returned to the past, looking right through the page at her memories of that time in her life.

"…When I wasn't with you, I didn't truly feel fulfilled. I realize that now, Amane-kun."

Mahiru expressed this with neither regret nor dissatisfaction, neither bitterness nor sorrow, but simply with a thoughtful, nostalgic tone that was also reflected in her clear and happy gaze. With that, she quietly closed her eyes, flipping to yet another page that she must have penned a long time ago.

Seemingly Similar yet Different People

It was a normal day off.

Mahiru had almost run out of the shampoo she used daily, and had gone out to replenish her stock. While she did, she also stopped by her regular beauty salon to get her hair treated and trimmed.

On her way back, she decided to take a break at a café. Though the place was packed—likely due to the holiday—she looked around for an open space, and spotted a familiar face seated in a corner. However, Mahiru wasn't sure if she should greet them. If it had been Chitose, she easily would have offered a greeting, but this was someone she rarely engaged with directly.

We're not exactly close, to be perfectly honest.

The person in question was Yuuta. Mahiru was unable to grasp the distance between them when they met like this at a café.

Truth be told, to her, he was a friend of Amane, Chitose, and Itsuki—nothing more.

While they would talk normally when they met, if asked, she'd find it hard to call him her friend. Itsuki was already a little distant, and Yuuta, being a friend of Itsuki's, was even more so.

They were friends of friends, so to speak. And while it was clear that he wasn't a bad person, she couldn't exactly say they were close either. Their relationship was of that kind, and they weren't close enough where one would go out of their way to start a conversation when bumping into the other in public.

"Hmm." While holding her tray with both hands, Mahiru hesitated for a moment, but after considering that she might get in the way of customers around her if she continued, she tentatively approached Yuuta. He was sitting at a table

for two, quietly reading.

"Hello, Kadowaki-san."

"Huh? Oh, Shiina-san. Hello."

Mahiru greeted Yuuta unassumingly, but his face lifted in mild surprise by the sudden mention of his name.

Since it was a day off, Yuuta was wearing casual clothes which, even to Mahiru, made him look quite handsome. Just lifting his head caused a stir among the other women in the cafe. Seeing the people around him reacting as he changed his expression of surprise to a soft smile, Mahiru thought he must be having a tough time too.

"Out shopping today?" Yuuta asked.

"Yes," Mahiru affirmed, "I stopped by for a little break and happened to see you here."

She shook the shopping bag on her wrist to show him, to which Yuuta nodded in understanding.

"Ah, I see. Good work. Wanna use the seat across from me? It doesn't look like there are any others free."

"Thank you very much, I shall take you up on that offer."

Though she felt it might be somewhat rude or shameless of her, Mahiru agreed and took the seat opposite him.

Considering their statuses at school, sharing a table like this might have been a bit risky. After all, it was entirely possible for other students from their school to be around.

But no other seats were free, and a quick scan around the café showed that none would likely be available anytime soon. It was an unavoidable choice.

Setting down her tray, Mahiru took a deep breath. Yuuta was already smiling, pulling the loose-leaf paper towards him that had been spread out on the table. There were also textbooks and a pencil case; he'd evidently been studying alone.

"So, Kadowaki-san…it seems like you have the day off from club activities. Are you studying?"

"Yep. I thought about doing it at home, but my sisters are pretty noisy."

"Your sisters?"

Mahiru remembered that she'd once heard from Amane that Yuuta had sisters, but she couldn't help widening her eyes at the word 'noisy,' which he'd said in a somewhat troubled tone.

She didn't know about his family, but it was hard to imagine that the sisters of Yuuta, who was rather calm and composed for a high school student, could be so problematic.

Noticing Mahiru blink repeatedly in disbelief, Yuuta added, "It's hard to believe, I know." He offered a bitter smile. "…This isn't something I should say to another woman, but you see, when you're a guy with multiple sisters, you sort of end up in situations where you can't exactly go against them. You're often outnumbered and have no choice but to listen to what they want…and you end up worked to the bone."

"Oh, wow. So some families like that do exist."

Mahiru, who was an only child, naturally couldn't understand how it felt to have an older sister. Unless, for all she knew, her mother had a child somewhere else.

More than that, she didn't quite grasp the concept of what a typical family was like, so she didn't know how siblings usually interacted with one another. Even when people mentioned that there was a hierarchy, it didn't resonate with her.

"Every family is different, but in my case, my sisters are rather strong-willed…"

Mahiru chuckled. "You're a gentle and mild-mannered person, Kadowaki-san, so I assume you end up catering to your sisters' wishes."

"You sure have a way with words, huh?"

"I thought a positive spin would be more appropriate."

Regardless, the fact remained that Yuuta was troubled. She thought it wasn't good to sympathize with him against his sisters in a negative way, so she took the route of complimenting him. In response, he gave her a somewhat uncomfortable expression.

He didn't seem to harbor any ill feelings towards his sisters, so it wasn't as though he hated them. Knowing this, Mahiru concluded that she probably hadn't misstepped.

“Anyway, there’s always some sort of chore dumped on me when I stay at home, and I wasn’t in a serious enough mood to study in the library, so I came here for a breather.”

“I see,” she understood what he was saying, but something still didn’t click, “but could you really consider this a ‘breather’?”

Glancing around, Mahiru noticed that there were young women frequently stealing glances in their direction and whispering amongst themselves. She had no interest in hearing the content of their conversations, but they were probably talking about Yuuta.

He seemed to understand what Mahiru was getting at, as he showed a faint smile. “Hmm, somewhat, I guess. I’m used to this now, after all.”

“You have your share of troubles too, Kadowaki-san.”

“Aha ha ha, not as much as you, Shiina-san.

“In that case, let me respond with, ‘I’ve grown used to it as well.’”

“We both have our struggles, don’t we?”

“Indeed. It’s quite problematic.”

Mahiru and Yuuta were similar in this regard.

While they both smiled bitterly when called such things, they were known by the nicknames *Angel* and *Prince*, and both were impeccably good-looking individuals.

They tended to receive unsought attention from the opposite sex and were often approached or admired. Looking at the current situation, Mahiru felt as though they had similar experiences.

The difference lay in the fact that Mahiru deliberately acted the way she did, while Yuuta was likely just being himself. It was unlikely that Yuuta had a hidden side to him like Mahiru.

“So, Shiina-san, you think of it as problematic?”

“Oh? But I didn’t say *what* I found problematic.”

“Neither did I.”

Mahiru chuckled. She’d thought they were somewhat alike, but they might also even have slightly similar personalities. While Yuuta didn’t appear to be as conniving as Mahiru, he also didn’t come across as someone completely innocent or straightforward either—there was more to him than that. The smiles they exchanged conveyed a mutual understanding not to probe any deeper.

“Anyway, continuing this guessing game won’t get us anywhere, so let’s not probe further. It’s impolite. Besides, it’s true that you have your own issues too, Shiina-san, so let’s just say we both have it tough.”

“Agreed.”

Mahiru felt slightly relieved that Yuuta quickly dropped the topic, saying that it was pointless to dig deeper into each other’s affairs. Still, she felt as though she shouldn’t let her guard down completely.

Knowing that he got along well with Amane, who wasn’t fond of socializing and was rather guarded, Mahiru knew there wasn’t an issue. Plus, she had thought highly of Yuuta’s character, even just as someone she sometimes saw at school.

He had even kept her Golden Week date with Amane a secret when they happened to bump into one another, and treated her calmly without much of a reaction for her status as the Angel. Thus, she thought of him as quite a good person.

And yet, she found herself being subtly cautious around him.

Once, she had the impression that Amane struggled to deal with other people, but the one who really struggled dealing with other people was Mahiru herself.

Operating under the principle that one should not trust others easily, she maintained a thin, invisible wall to protect her personal space while acting as an angel. Perhaps that was why she couldn’t fully trust him. She didn’t dislike him; rather, she just didn’t know him well, making him an enigma in her mind.

Unaware of Mahiru’s internal assessment, Yuuta looked at her with his usual gentle smile.

“So, were you out with Shirakawa-san today or something, Shiina-san?”

“No, I went out alone today. Chitose-san seemed to have plans with Akazawa-san, and it isn’t like we’re always together anyway.”

Certainly, Chitose was her closest same-sex friend, but they didn’t always do everything together. Chitose had many other friends, and she sometimes spent time with them or with her boyfriend, Itsuki.

Mahiru had already checked Chitose’s schedule for the day and hadn’t even invited her along. It wouldn’t make sense to inconvenience her just for hair care shopping, and she didn’t want to interrupt her time with her boyfriend either.

“Ahhh, Itsuki mentioned something like that. It’s just that I always imagine you and Shirakawa-san together.”

“Hehe, we haven’t been interacting for that long, actually.”

“Maybe it’s the strong impact? Whenever Shirakawa-san sees you, she’s always like, ‘Mahiruuun!’ and runs over to you.”

“Indeed, she does pay a lot of attention to me.”

Mahiru was, in fact, well-cared-for by the outgoing Chitose. Because Chitose was quite proactive in approaching her, people around them quickly had the impression that they were very close.

The way they treated each other suggested they had been friends for many years, but in reality, they had only been friends since the start of the year. Strictly in terms of time, not much had actually passed.

“I saw that you two were close, but I guess it hasn’t been that long at all, huh. In our first year, both you and Shirakawa-san were in different classes… When did you start getting closer?”

“I believe we started interacting more directly around the beginning of this year.”

“Ah, so it’s been less than half a year.”

“I’m genuinely grateful that she’s been so kind to me. Very much so.”

Why Chitose took such a liking to her still remained a mystery, even to Mahiru. Yet she’d been saved numerous times by Chitose’s straightforward, cheerful demeanor. There were moments when Chitose was a bit too energetic, but that was part of her charm.

“Well, Shirakawa-san really seems to like you. I hear about you from her quite often.”

“…What is Chitose-san doing… Honestly.” Mahiru hadn’t expected that Chitose would be talking about her even to Yuuta and couldn’t help chiding her, even though she knew Chitose wasn’t there.

She’d shown sides of herself to Chitose that she wouldn’t show to Yuuta, so Mahiru was genuinely concerned about what might have been said. However, Yuuta looked at her the same way he always had, so she’d like to believe that Chitose hadn’t been filling his head with weird ideas.

I should have a word with Chitose-san later… Mahiru decided, taking a sip of her now considerably cooled café au lait.

Meanwhile, Yuuta gazed at her with a gentle expression. “…I’m surprised at

how easily you're talking to me."

"What do you mean?" She asked in response after moistening her lips.

Yuuta paused, struggling for the right words. "Hmm, what's the best way to word this…" His words sounded evasive. "Well, it's odd for me to say, but we're not particularly close, are we, Shiina-san? To you, I'm probably just a friend of a friend. I thought it might be awkward with just the two of us."

Mahiru blinked several times, surprised that Yuuta had mentioned something she'd also been concerned about. However, his eyes had a considerate, almost troubled look, accompanied by a vague smile. This reassured her a little, and she lessened her wariness of him slightly.

"Well, to say I had absolutely no reservations would be a lie, but I am fairly aware of what kind of person you are, Kadowaki-san."

"I'm grateful you approve of me. I totally assumed you found me unpleasant, Shiina-san."

"'Unpleasant? How?"

"Well, more like an 'It'll just cause trouble if I get involved with this guy, so let's avoid him,' kind of feeling?"

Yuuta, as Mahiru had suspected, was an astute and perceptive individual. He was sensitive to the opinions of others. The reason they both kept their distance from one another was to avoid any likely complications. Of course, Mahiru wasn't interested in him in that way, which was the biggest factor, but she also suspected that getting involved with him even casually would stir up trouble.

Being a girl popular among the boys and Yuuta being a popular boy among the girls, their potential friendship could invite unwanted jealousy and potentially cause harm to one of or both of them. It wasn't hard to imagine the negative speculations that would come flying their way.

If it weren't for Amane being friends with Yuuta, she wouldn't even have considered the idea of sharing a table like this. Since she wanted to avoid increasing any unnecessary worries, she would likely have chosen to keep her distance, and let sleeping dogs lie.

Even though they were both popular enough to have earned embarrassing nicknames, it was likely that Yuuta had also kept his distance for the same reason. From Mahiru's perspective, however, the more convincing explanation was simply that neither of them were particularly interested in the other.

"I see. There are indeed things to be cautious about, but that doesn't make

you an unlikable person, Kadowaki-san."

"…I guess that's true."

"While we kept a certain distance to avoid unnecessary rumors, it's not like I had any particular thoughts about you."

Even now, I'm still somewhat cautious around him—he seems rather shrewd, Mahiru thought, though she didn't find Yuuta's personality disagreeable. In fact, she considered him to be of the preferable sort. While she generally disliked interacting with others, she deemed his nature acceptable, at least to the extent of holding a conversation like this.

"Well, thanks," responded Yuuta.

"Conversely, I was actually wondering if you were the one having reservations about me."

"Not really."

"That's good then, I suppose."

Mahiru understood that he hardly ever spoke to her, out of consideration for his influence. But she'd also noticed that even when others weren't looking, Yuuta's demeanor barely changed. She could sense slight awkwardness from him at times, which made her wonder if Yuuta had some reservations about her.

However, Yuuta had instead lowered his eyebrows in response to her question, looking troubled. Apparently, she hadn't hit the nail on the head—instead, the look on Yuuta's face suggested that he hadn't expected Mahiru to phrase it that way.

Had I misunderstood? Mahiru thought, revising her evaluation with a soft sigh.

"By the way, is it alright for you to be having tea with me?" Yuuta asked.

"Come again?" As she sighed, thinking that she still had a long way to go, Mahiru received a question that she didn't quite understand. She'd ended up replying in her normal voice, which surprised Yuuta, so when Mahiru cleared her throat and reasked, "In what way?" he wore an awkward smile that was different from before.

"I mean, don't you…need to go to Fuji— …go *back* to *his* place soon? Or is it fine not to?" Yuuta deliberately avoided using the name, likely out of consideration for the public setting. But in that case, Mahiru wished he hadn't asked at all. She nearly spilled her café au lait from the shock.

Meeting Yuuta's gaze cautiously so as not to reveal her agitation, Mahiru found Yuuta looking back at her with an oddly curious expression.

"Wh–Why would you say that?"

"Huh? Well, you're always together, aren't you?"

"H-How did you know?"

"Well, to be honest, it's pretty obvious… With how you treat each other, anyone who sees you two together would figure out that you're always together."

Yuuta had already been told that Mahiru often cooked meals at Amane's house, and had understood that they were on close terms. But Mahiru hadn't at all expected him to imply that they were *always together*.

Indeed, Mahiru *was* often at Amane's house, almost to the point where it felt like her second home. She even spent most of her time there outside of mealtime. Amane had never rejected her, either—instead, they had naturally come to accept this as their routine. Still, being told that by someone who wasn't really involved with them came as a great shock to her.

Then, being subtly reminded that others had caught on about her feelings for Amane was another shock. Almost groaning, Mahiru had to struggle to maintain her usual expression, whether she was successful or not.

"…It's not as if I'm there e-every day."

"Still more than I'd expected. Maybe like six days a week, then?"

"I won't deny that. We're splitting the cost of food, so naturally, we end up eating together."

Yuuta nodded solemnly. "It's natural for you to be with him all the time, after all."

Mahiru, unable to restrain her responses any longer, shot him a suspicious glare. "…What exactly are you trying to say, Kadowaki-san?"

"Huh? Nothing in particular, really…hmm. If there's one thing I had to say, it's that you seem much more lively now than when I see you at school."

"Doesn't everyone feel that way among friends?"

"Maybe, but it's a different lively compared to when you're with Shirakawa-san."

Mahiru closed her lips, unable to offer a reply. Yuuta then waved his hand gently with a soft look, as if to reassure her.

“It’s not that I want to make a big deal out of it or anything. I was just thinking that maybe you’d prefer spending time with him than me. Aren’t you worried about making him jealous?”

It appeared that Yuuta was concerned in his own way, but for Mahiru, such words were bad for her heart.

Jealousy, of all things…

In the first place, Amane wasn’t the type to get jealous over who Mahiru interacted with. His personality being what it was, he never got jealous over something or some*one* that didn’t belong to him.

The one who did, had always been Mahiru. “…If he did, then I wouldn’t be having such a hard time.”

“Aha ha.”

“On the other hand, do you believe he would get jealous, Kadowaki-san?”

“Hmm, strange to say this since I brought it up, but I don’t think he would. Even if you told him you had tea with me, he’d probably just say, ‘Oh, I see,’ and move on.”

“…You understand him very well.”

“Has it happened before?”

“Yes, I once spoke with Akazawa-san one-on-one. Before any hint of jealousy, he was concerned about whether we had talked about anything unnecessary.”

“Sounds just like him.”

“It’s not as if he would get jealous, so it’s not an issue.”

“If anything, I feel like *you’d* be the one getting anxious over things like that, Shiina-san.”

He can read people so easily like that. Perhaps I should consider him someone difficult to deal with after all…? Mahiru couldn’t help thinking that.

Unlike Amane, who was candid and straightforward despite his usual calm demeanor, or Itsuki, who always seemed to see the bigger picture while wearing a carefree smile, Yuuta was a deep thinker, the type who hid his thoughts behind his smile—a troublesome opponent if ever made an enemy.

Itsuki could be difficult to interact with too, but he was unequivocally on Amane’s side and had motives that were easy to understand, making it easier to interact with him. But she couldn’t quite get a read on Yuuta’s position.

She ended up staring at him with a studying look to probe his intentions, to which Yuuta responded with a lowered brow and a smile.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to tease you. It's just that when it comes to him, you're easy to read."

"…Is it really that obvious?"

"Yup." Yuuta nodded without a moment's hesitation.

Unable to bear it, Mahiru subtly pressed her cheek and let out a soft sigh. "I must be more careful, it's still too early."

"'Early', huh."

"Indeed. Early."

"Hopefully, the right time for you will come soon."

While Mahiru wondered if there was a meaning hidden behind Yuuta's words, it likely was just pure support from him. It wasn't as though she had room to complain—she also had a faint shadiness about her in the eyes of others. Even so, she still found it difficult to read his thoughts and narrowed her eyes slightly.

"…Excuse me for asking while you're right here, but have you ever been told that you're difficult to read?"

"Don't you get that a lot too, Shiina-san?"

With a slight laugh, Mahiru replied, "People often say that, yes, but behind my back."

Indeed, Mahiru was in no position to criticize Yuuta in that regard.

She maintained her façade as the Angel, and treated everyone with courtesy, kindness and politeness. When said by those who disliked her, that line was akin to calling her two-faced, but there was nothing Mahiru could do about that.

She was used to being spoken ill of. While she received words of praise from many people, she also received words of envy, jealousy, and resentment. Ever since establishing her Angel persona, it had really only happened behind her back, but even then, there were still those who'd bad-mouth her while ensuring she could hear them when she was alone.

She understood that the brighter the light, the darker the shadow it casts. That's why she never sought to change that aspect of herself, nor did she believe she could.

I've already grown accustomed to it.

I've resigned myself to it.

Without changing her expression, she placed those feelings into her smile, conveying them without words.

At this, Yuuta's smile darkened. "So you've picked up on that, huh?"

"Yes, I have."

"…You really have it tougher than I do."

"Well, I'm accustomed to it." She probably shouldn't have, but it had become so routine that it felt like everyday life. It had *become* her everyday life. "Don't give it a second thought," she continued. "In fact, things would become worse if you tried anything."

"I'm not foolish enough to add fuel to the fire," Yuuta responded.

"Thank you for your wise decision."

Yuuta had the good sense to stay an outsider, knowing his own influence all too well. It was a relief for Mahiru. He must have known that it wasn't anything a sense of justice alone could solve.

"Make sure to tell him before it gets painful for you."

"Good point. I will give it some thought."

Yuuta offered the best advice he could. However, Mahiru had no intention of relying on Amane unless absolutely necessary.

Still, it was comforting to know she had someone to turn to, and she could see that Yuuta's suggestion came from a place of concern. With that, Mahiru nodded sincerely and finished her long-cold café au lait.

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By the time Mahiru finished some additional shopping after parting ways with Yuuta, it was already evening. When she returned home, or more accurately, to Amane's place, a warm sensation filled her chest at the sight of Amane diligently preparing dinner. Still unaware of her return, he was hard at work in the kitchen handling vegetables by himself, following the recipe Mahiru had left for him.

Lately, he had been wearing his apron with confidence. Watching him measure ingredients and scrutinize the recipe, an indescribable sense of endearment welled up inside her, making her lips curl into a smile.

"I'm home," announced Mahiru.

Amane, who had been engrossed in his task, visibly jumped at her voice. He

looked over at her and when their eyes met, she offered him a warm smile.

His eyebrows then drooped in an apologetic fashion. “Ah, welcome home. Sorry—I was so focused I didn’t even notice.”

“I suspected as much. It was clear watching you,” she replied, but Mahiru had no intention of blaming him. Rather, the sight of him cooking on his own filled her heart with warmth—in fact, she felt genuine happiness and joy from the situation. “You should’ve just waited for me to return home,” she added. “I did send you a message saying I’d be home soon, you know?”

“I haven’t checked my phone, sorry. Still, wouldn’t it be easier for you if I prepped some things before you get back?” Amane asked. Mahiru felt a mixture of itchiness and joy when he then laughed, adding, “Today’s dish must’ve taken you a while to prepare, right? With it needing to marinate and all.”

Amane had come a long way—from initially relying solely on her taking care of everything to then helping out, and now even taking the initiative to cook, his growth was incredible. If the Amane from six months ago could see him now, he’d be amazed.

“Thank you,” Mahiru softly muttered to Amane, who had been extremely considerate to ensure her outing was enjoyable. However, Amane himself found this somewhat amusing, saying, “That’s usually *my* line.”

“I really do like that about you,” she said thoughtfully, placing her freshly purchased items on the sofa. As she tied her hair back and returned to the kitchen where Amane was, she found him staring intently at her for one reason or another.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“Not really, it’s just that your hair looks extra silky today. Well, it’s *always* silky, but today it’s especially lustrous.”

“…Did I mention where I was going today?”

She had told him she’d go shopping but hadn’t mentioned visiting the beauty salon. It was natural to see changes in someone’s hair after they visited a beauty salon, but if they weren’t told, then it was something only someone paying close attention would notice.

Mahiru never slacked when maintaining her hair, so her treatment at the beauty salon hadn’t made any dramatic changes to her appearance. While the quality of her hair had improved, it was mainly the texture that had changed.

“Huh? Well, I thought I shouldn’t pry, so I hadn’t asked for any details. It’s

just that your hair looks more elegant than usual with it tied up. Very smooth, and pretty."

"You really do pay close attention."

"…So, did you go to a beauty salon? I see."

After hearing Mahiru affirm that her hair quality had improved, which helped him understand where she'd been, Amane effortlessly complimented her, saying, "You look even more beautiful." Averting her gaze, Mahiru once again thanked him, softly responding, "Thank you very much."

Amane, seemingly unaware of any change in Mahiru's expression, checked the recipe pinned on the fridge and chuckled, "Maybe I should go there sometime soon as well."

Mahiru was torn between being impressed by Amane's casually observant comments and the urge to complain about them. Trying not to say anything, she washed her hands and stood next to him. As she marveled at Amane's prep work—a skill that he now seemed to have perfected—she checked the next step in the recipe and peeked into the fridge.

"Did you enjoy your outing?" Amane asked.

In response to the question coming from beside her, Mahiru gave a small smile. "Yes—it's nice to head out alone once in a while."

"That's great. You haven't really been going out much lately."

"Well, by nature, I'm more of an indoor person. If there's no specific reason to go out, I usually stay at home. I don't have the energy to go outside just for the sake of trying to find something to do."

"Ha ha, I totally get it," related Amane. "I also won't go out without a reason to."

"You prefer watching movies or playing games at home, right, Amane-kun?"

"Yep, exactly. I'm more of the laid-back type."

While Amane was more of an indoor person than Mahiru, it wasn't like he spent all his days off cooped up. He played with Itsuki and the others, or went running as part of his training. He also did some physical activities, so he couldn't be categorized purely as an indoor type.

"Incidentally, I happened to run into Kadowaki-san today. We chatted for a bit."

"Oh, I see. He has no club activities today, after all. What was he doing?"

"…Really, you understand him very well."

Mahiru's words weren't directed at Amane, who was standing before her.

"Hmm, strange to say this since I brought it up, but I don't think he would. Even if you told him you had tea with me, he'd probably just say, 'Oh, I see,' and move on," Mahiru remembered what Yuuta had said at the café. The reality was just as he predicted, leaving her feeling slightly frustrated.

"Huh, what do you mean?"

"Nothing. I just happened to see him studying at a café and we shared a table. He said that if he did it at home, his sisters would 'work him to the bone.'"

"Ha ha, he does say his sisters are quite intense. It must really be something if *Kadowaki's* saying it."

Amane, being his friend, knew more about Yuuta than Mahiru but had apparently never met his sisters. Imagining the situation, Amane seemed to find it amusing.

"…What's wrong?" Noticing Mahiru was lost in thought, Amane asked with a tone of concern.

She shook her head lightly. "…I was just thinking that, well, Kadowaki-san isn't someone you should be careless around."

"Did he do something?"

"No, it's like…because we're in the same category of people, there was this…strange sense of tension between us when we were together…"

She couldn't possibly say that she found it unfair, so Mahiru softly described what she'd felt today. Amane seemed to more or less understand, replying, "Ah, like you're both feeling each other out."

"Both of us have our positions, so it becomes scary to do it unconsciously."

"I do get what you mean, but Kadowaki's a good guy, you know?"

"I understand that. I do, but I'm afraid of people who are unconditionally kind. Individuals who act without expecting something in return are trickier to deal with than those who do."

Without a doubt, Yuuta was a good man.

Although he was the kind of person who made one think he was hiding something, Mahiru sensed that it wasn't anything malicious. Certainly, he was tricky to read, but Mahiru believed he was likely a good person. But for her, who had made it to this point by not readily accepting others, she still couldn't fully trust him.

She knew he was thoughtful and had an excellent character, and was likely supporting her relationship with Amane with good intentions. Yet, she couldn't help but try to read between the lines, even if she didn't get a sense of something hidden.

"I get what you're trying to say, but I don't think you have to be that cautious."

"I do understand that, you know." Still, Mahiru was wired to be wary of people.

"Well, if you don't like him, you don't have to force yourself to interact with him. Maybe I should stay on my toes a bit, too."

"No, it's not that I dislike him," she denied, "it's just…"

"Just?"

"…There are things that I find to be a bit…"

Strangely, it was the level of Yuuta's understanding of Amane that bothered her. Yuuta had only started interacting with Amane since about the start of the new term, but to her surprise, he already seemed to have a precise understanding of Amane. The idea that someone else could claim her role as the one who best understood Amane made her uneasy, despite her knowing he didn't 'belong' to her.

"Are they bad feelings?"

"No, not like that…it's just something I'm selfishly thinking. It's not like I dislike him or anything."

"I see. Well, compatibility is a thing, so it can't be helped."

"I mean…it's like, Kadowaki-san seems to understand you incredibly well, Amane-kun…"

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"…Why are you sulking?"

"I'm not."

I'm not jealous of Kadowaki-san or anything. Definitely not.

She assured herself of such as she added the seasoning Amane had measured beforehand into the pot, and Amane tilted his head quizzically.

No Effort Bears Fruit in a Single Day

From Amane's perspective, Mahiru was undeniably a hard worker—one who wouldn't allow herself to compromise when it came to achieving her goals.

To those who weren't familiar with her, she might seem like a naturally gifted genius who could grasp ten concepts after hearing just one. But to Amane, Mahiru was a talented individual who also put in the hard work needed to acquire knowledge and experience—she was nothing short of outstanding.

Amane knew that Mahiru's achievements weren't just limited just to academics. They also extended to physical fitness, beauty, and household skills. Everything Mahiru achieved had come from hard work, not half-baked effort.

"…Really, she's such a hard worker," Amane muttered to himself, watching as Mahiru lifted light weights while simultaneously listening to some English exercises. Her soft yet slender upper arms must have been maintained through such workouts. Mahiru shifted her gaze to him as she continued her training, apparently having heard his comment despite her focus.

"If that's how it appears, then I am grateful… I suppose?"

"Why's that a question?"

"Well, some would consider it a virtue to work hard behind the scenes, you see." Mahiru paused the audio playback as she chuckled. "But I'm working hard in front of you, aren't I?"

Amane looked at her in disbelief. "Really? What's wrong with showing your hard work?"

"Couldn't it appear like you are trying to show off?" she returned.

"Maybe showing off the results would be a problem, but there's nothing wrong with working hard normally." Amane answered. "People who do that are likely to undervalue the results anyways. They take them for granted, thinking

that achieving something should be easy."

Unfortunately, it's common for people to disregard the time, money, and effort that someone had invested in acquiring a particular skill. Since, in the eyes of others, the person in question had 'easily' obtained the results they sought, they assume that it wasn't a hard thing to do in general.

"In my case, I'm not exactly hiding it. No one sees me since I do it at home," Mahiru replied nonchalantly. After counting up to fifty, she placed her dumbbells down on the carpet and lightly touched her upper arms to gauge her condition.

Indeed, Mahiru practiced at home—well, at *Amane's* home, to be precise. This was a side of her unknown to anyone but him. Because of this ignorance, people often underestimated her.

Whether Mahiru seemed unbothered by this because she was incredibly tolerant or had simply grown used to it, Amane was unsure.

"While I am diligent in school, it isn't as though I'm solely focused on academics. Seeing that, some do think my academic abilities are simply due to natural talent," Mahiru explained.

"Talent might have played a role in it, but in the end, it's talent nurtured through hard work. Besides, the amount of effort you personally put in is on a whole other level… Watching you, I think it's admirable."

"Once it becomes a habit, it feels natural, and the stress begins to fade. I'm also aware that I'm fortunate to see the fruit of my labor. If people want to call it talent, then I want to make the most of it if I can."

Mahiru evaluated herself in a refreshingly straightforward manner, acknowledging her own continued efforts for what they were without any concern or bravado. In that moment, her posture and demeanor seemed so dignified that Amane found himself most captivated.

"Initially, I had focused my efforts on being a good girl, but now I work hard more for simple self-improvement. I don't find it mentally or physically burdensome, either."

"You're putting in more effort than anybody else, that's for sure."

"Well, I am doing this for the future."

"The 'future'…?" asked Amane tentatively.

"Yes. The future." Mahiru flashed a beautiful smile and looked straight into Amane's eyes. "Amane-kun. Without fail, people grow old."

“What? Where did that come from?” Amane had been thrown off by the unexpected segue, but Mahiru paid no heed and continued without pause.

“As time passes, we all age. Just as a beautiful flower eventually withers, our physical ability and beauty from our youth will diminish as we grow older.”

Such was the undeniable law of life.

Any form of life, given enough time, will age and eventually approach death. The further you advance past your body’s peak, the more your body deteriorates and your appearance fades.

“Amane-kun. My looks are attractive—I’m cute, right?” Mahiru’s smile—a perfect blend of charm and self-confidence—would doubtlessly have been seen as cute by anyone who laid eyes on it. That gentle look was utterly radiant, befitting of being called a ‘million-dollar smile’.

Even if her words could have been taken as an overly self-confident remark, they carried no arrogance. Amane fully understood that her beauty, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, had been the result of her amazingly hard work.

Amane knew that her flaxen hair, silky and lustrous like spun silk, was always meticulously untangled by her. Mahiru had also apparently used a variety of shampoos, conditioners, and treatments. Amane knew she had been diligent about moisturizing her skin with quality skincare products, and that she had also controlled the quality of her skin from the inside with a balanced diet. Amane knew that her slim yet feminine physique had been the result of careful adjustments to her diet and exercise regimen. Because he spent so much time by her side, Amane knew very well that Mahiru put a great deal of effort into her appearance. And because he’d been watching her all this time, this familiarity lent a particular weight to Mahiru’s words.

“You look *really* cute. I think it’s the result of all your hard work.” After agonizing over how to praise her properly, Amane spoke from the heart. Mahiru was already naturally beautiful. Amane knew, however, just how much effort she poured into her appearance. While she possessed a beauty that couldn’t be explained by genetics alone, it would only shine if she continued to polish it.

With his reply, Mahiru’s smile softened further, tinged with a bit of bashfulness. “Thank you very much. I have been putting a lot of effort into it.”

“Yep, I know. You’re always giving it your all.” Having spent increasing amounts of time beside Mahiru, Amane had come to understand her hard work.

Although her cheeks flushed ever so slightly when praised by him, she cleared her throat and composed herself before continuing. “But this cuteness of mine only applies while I am still young. Generally, youthful features are preferred.”

“I see where you’re coming from, but…”

“Needless to say, I will continue to do my best to maintain my looks, but aging is inevitable. To solely rely on something as risky as appearance or charm…the world isn’t so forgiving as to make that viable.” Mahiru, with her somewhat harsh world view, let out a soft sigh as she looked his way. “But even if that *was* an option, I wouldn’t want to take it. Again, it’s far too risky and it invites resentment from others.”

“Ahhh…well, I get it. Nobody wants to purposely cross a dangerous bridge.”

“Given my position, I already face a good deal of jealousy, and I don’t want to add to it. Besides, I find it annoying when people compliment me based only on shallow observation.”

Fundamentally, Mahiru never flaunted or emphasized her beauty, but there were still those who were jealous of the frequent attention she received from men.

Due to her ‘angelic’ behavior and ability, and her sociable attitude, never once had she been subjected to such animosity openly. But if she were to attempt to actively leverage her looks, Amane knew that only chaos would ensue.

Of course, that was an unlikely prospect given that she disliked being bothered by strangers, but if she went through with it, conflict would most certainly break out between the boys and girls.

Mahiru seemed aware of this herself, her face taking on a weary expression as she pondered the possibilities.

“… In other words,” she continued, “it’s important to polish your skills and qualities as a person, whether you show the work or not. Going forward, I wish to avoid being evaluated as a good-looking individual with no other redeeming qualities. For example, lacking substance or utility as an adult.” Having concluded with a rather pragmatic outlook, Mahiru cast a quiet smile at a bewildered Amane. “Eventually, the reflection of a person once their outer beauty fades is the essence of the life they have lived up until that point. I want

to live my life in a way that doesn't bring shame upon myself."

"That's definitely not the way a regular high schooler thinks," Amane remarked.

Mahiru chuckled. "I have been this way for a long time—I owe it all to Koyuki-san's guidance."

Amane wanted to interject about just who this Koyuki-san was, considering how mischievous Mahiru's smile had become. But he had to admit that the teachings from this Koyuki-san seemed to form the cornerstone of Mahiru's current character, and suspected that she—out of concern for Mahiru—presented her with the harsh realities of life early on.

Amane couldn't say whether teaching her of such a harsh reality had been the correct choice. Still, he acknowledged that it helped shape the very young Mahiru into someone who could face the future without despair. Her current mindset and personality was all thanks to Koyuki-san.

"Well, I may have complicated matters a little, but the point is aspiring to be a person of substance. If you live your life superficially and without any meaningful thought, you're likely to experience a midlife crisis sooner or later."

"Yeah. I get what you're saying, but I'm surprised you're thinking that far ahead."

Could this be her second life? Mahiru spoke with such foresight that this absurd thought had briefly crossed Amane's mind. Both impressed by her, and simultaneously, somewhat disgusted with himself for not being able to think as far ahead, he noticed Mahiru subtly lowering her eyebrows as she smiled.

"Were you perhaps shocked or overwhelmed?" Mahiru asked. "Personally, I think I have quite a nasty personality."

"No, you misunderstand. It's just that I hadn't thought that far ahead. It's kinda pathetic of me, really," Amane regretted.

"Why would that make you pathetic?"

"It's true that I'm working hard to improve myself, but I haven't given much thought to where I should be putting the effort in for the future." Amane had been doing his best as well, but not nearly to the same level as Mahiru was. It wasn't as though he had a clear goal in mind, either.

He started it all simply wanting to stand proudly next to Mahiru.

Although he'd been working hard and seeing results, the amount of effort couldn't compare to hers, and he didn't have such precise goals, which made him feel slightly arrogant for even making the comparison.

He'd been told before not to put himself down and had been careful not to. But still, he found the disparity between them disappointing, precisely because he could see first-hand just how hard Mahiru was working.

"Why must you find the need to compare us like that…"

"Sorry."

"And why are you apologizing? Working hard to improve yourself is commendable, you know? After all, hard work is an accumulation of continued effort. What you do now will have knock-on effects on your future. You need to acknowledge the fact that you're currently working hard." Mahiru lightly poked Amane's cheek with her fingertip, casting a resigned smile and a corrective gaze at him. "Really, geez…"

"…Mm."

"You really do lack confidence, don't you, Amane-kun?"

"I–I can't help it," he returned, "I mean, uh, I'm not even sure I'm facing myself properly…"

"You're currently putting all that effort into improving yourself *because* you think you're inadequate, right? Is that not proof that you *are* facing yourself?"

"I hope so…*whoa!*" Perhaps responding to Amane's inability to nod in agreement, Mahiru placed her hands on both his cheeks, pinching his face without any hesitation whatsoever.

Although Amane wasn't particularly chubby, there was enough meat for her to grab onto. It was certainly firmer than Mahiru's—since she was a girl—so it didn't stretch out as far as hers, but it was stretched enough to hinder his speech.

"Hey, wisten here…"

"…Should you refuse to admit it, you will be sentenced to cheek-pinching until you do."

"I–I undewstand…"

"Very good." Mahiru nodded contentedly, but showed no signs of letting go.

Amane stared at her in response. "…Leth go, pwease."

"…Can't I keep doing it a little longer?"

"You cwan't."

"Mmfh…" Mahiru, for some reason, performed a combo of one squeeze and

one knead on Amane's cheek before finally releasing him with a reluctant look. As a result, Amane felt a little more freedom in his facial muscles than before as he touched his cheeks.

It wasn't painful, but it felt slightly odd.

Mahiru seemed to want something from him, but when Amane began to object with, "Look here," she immediately halted her gaze. Whether Mahiru enjoyed touching or teasing him, she frequently and happily initiated physical contact with him, which unsettled Amane—the one on the receiving end—to some extent.

Finally, as the discomfort in his cheeks and his unusually fast-beating heart began to settle, he turned to face Mahiru again. Gone was the mischievous demeanor she'd just been directing him, replaced by a gentle, enveloping smile.

"…You are doing your best, Amane-kun."

Her voice, far gentler than the expression playing on her face, softly entered Amane's ears.

"While I won't claim you have no flaws, you are aware of them and constantly try to improve. If anyone has a problem with that, I will set them straight myself," Mahiru declared.

"You don't need to dirty your hands, Mahiru."

"Oh? I will do it just using words, you know?"

"You'll just dirty your mouth instead."

"Rest assured, I haven't fallen so far as to insult people using such words."

"Yeeahh, I'm *still* gonna have to pass on that," Amane replied staunchly.

Sporting a perfect smile, Mahiru exuded an attitude that—no matter how one looked at it—detested conflict, yet she was clearly the type to follow through on her words.

If she said she would do something, she would *definitely* do it. If he hadn't stopped her, Amane could imagine her pressing on with sound arguments until her opponent gave in—all with that same placid smile. Oddly enough, she would never get mad about her own issues but would get furious over Amane's concerns as if they were her own, if not more so.

Should I be pleased? Troubled…? Amane wasn't sure.

Whatever the case, since any complaints were hypothetical, Amane decided not to kick up a fuss about it. Then to distract Mahiru, who seemed a bit dissatisfied, he started patting her head.

Mahiru, too, seemed aware that being petted would help shake off her negative emotions. Although she showed reluctance at first, she ultimately appeared to enjoy having her head stroked and meekly accepted Amane's touch.

As he continued to pat her head, as if reducing her imaginary anger gauge toward some unknown opponent, Mahiru mumbled, "It's not like I'm mad or anything." The way she acted resembled a sulking child, and Amane couldn't help seeing it that way.

Finally letting go of the now-calmed Mahiru, he saw her make a face that suggested she was reluctant to part from the touch. However, knowing that too much contact could also be problematic, he deliberately ignored it.

"…You know, frankly, it's not like I want to be recognized by everyone," Amane admitted.

"Really?"

"Well, I mean—I *do* want those around me to acknowledge me, but…what I really want is to satisfy myself, to be proud of who I am."

In the first place, Amane wasn't the type to seek acknowledgement from people he had nothing to do with.

What he wished for was to be a person worthy of standing beside Mahiru. The battle was more against himself than for others. Even as he suffered from the disparity between his ideals and reality, he didn't agonize over what others believed.

The person he most wanted to satisfy was himself, not anyone else.

Sure, having his change recognized by others might be pleasing, but that wasn't the end goal.

"…I see," replied Mahiru. "Then I shall be watching over you until you achieve the results that satisfy you."

"I'll do my best. For my own sake."

At Amane's firm declaration, Mahiru briefly widened her eyes in slight wonder. Then, while blushing faintly, she nodded and whispered, "I'm rooting for you," her smile gently pushing Amane forward.

Remnants of a Fleeting Childhood Dream

As a rhythmic *chop, chop, chop* filled the air of the dining room, Mahiru felt a sense of warmth and contentment as she worked on her homework. While she typically completed her homework in her room, on the days when Koyuki was there, she often did it in the dining room, enjoying the sounds of Koyuki cooking.

Truth be told, Mahiru could easily finish her homework quicker, but she found comfort in completing it slowly when accompanied by the sounds of the kitchen—the slicing of the knife, the sizzling of ingredients, the bubbling of boiling food, and the pleasant aromas that wafted over as the cooking progressed. More than anything else, she loved that atmosphere.

Besides, Mahiru knew that here, Koyuki would notice her hard work and offer words of praise.

Sensing Koyuki occasionally glancing in her direction, Mahiru continued tackling her homework with high spirits. Slowly, very slowly, she would work until Koyuki's dish was ready.

Despite her hunger, she found such moments enjoyable and wished they could last longer. After all, it would extend the time she spent with Koyuki.

"Ojou-sama, it's ready."

"Okaay!"

Mahiru finally heard Koyuki's voice and gleefully closed the notebook lying on the table.

Towards the end, even though she had already finished and was pretending to still be working—an act clearly undeserving of praise—she rationalized that since she was actually done, it was no issue.

With a secret smile, she meticulously gathered the eraser shavings and threw them into the trash bin. If she didn't clean up properly, Koyuki would scold her when lining the table. She collected her notebook filled with written kanji and math worksheets, setting them neatly on the living room table.

Then, she walked into the kitchen with a smile, only to find Koyuki removing her apron, wearing a gentle smile of her own.

"You worked hard on your homework again today."

"Yep!"

Clearly, Koyuki had been watching her after all.

Then, as the woman who balanced roles as a housekeeper and tutor, she whispered softly as she folded her apron. "Please go wash your hands. I shall set the table in the meantime." Koyuki maintained her soft smile as she looked at Mahiru.

Without hesitation, Mahiru nodded and headed to the sink. Stretching to reach it, Mahiru washed her hands and took a brief glance at the array of dishes being set on the dining table, her cheeks relaxing into a smile.

It seemed today's menu was Japanese cuisine.

While her peers weren't the biggest fans of Japanese food, Mahiru personally loved its flavors. Although she also enjoyed Western food, when it came to a sense of comfort, Japanese dishes—with their calming tastes—always made her feel at ease.

Koyuki would often say, *"It's important to expose yourself to various flavors from a young age to develop your palate."* Consequently, she prepared a wide range of dishes, but Mahiru had always maintained a special fondness for Japanese cuisine.

After washing her hands thoroughly, Mahiru took her seat at the dining table, and Koyuki sat down directly across from her.

However, there was nothing in front of Koyuki.

Though Mahiru yearned to share even a single meal with her, Koyuki remained, strictly speaking, a 'housekeeper,' not a family member.

Anytime Mahiru hinted at the desire to eat together, Koyuki would politely but regretfully decline, leaving Mahiru to dine alone.

If only we could eat together…

But Mahiru understood that expressing this selfish wish would put Koyuki in an awkward position, so she never voiced it. With a sigh, she gazed at the dishes arrayed before her on the table.

Today's menu was strictly Japanese: the usual rice and miso soup, tamagoyaki made with dashi, a simmered dish of chicken and vegetables, and spinach dressed in sesame.

"Everything looks tasty," Mahiru uttered in awe.

"I put extra effort into today's meal, you see. Please enjoy it while it's still warm."

"Okay!"

Nodding, Mahiru clasped her hands together and politely said, "Thank you for the food," before gently sipping the miso soup. The warm, comforting taste gradually seeped into her body, making her feel as though she were enveloped in a cozy warmth from the inside out. This was her favorite flavor, a taste that brought her a sense of happiness.

As Mahiru quietly savored her food, one small bite at a time, Koyuki watched her with a warm smile.

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While helping Koyuki clean up the dishes, Mahiru voiced a question she had been pondering. "Why are, you so good at cooking, Koyuki-san?" Her words were punctuated by erratic pauses, as if stumbling over her words.

Koyuki's cooking was exceptionally good. While it felt wrong to compare it to cafeteria food, Mahiru couldn't help but wonder, since Koyuki's meals always matched her tastes better than her school's food.

"You see, I've lived many more years than you, Ojou-sama, and have prepared meals for my daughters every day. One naturally becomes skilled at it as a mother."

"So, is my mother, also good at cooking?"

At that innocent question, Koyuki's smile seemed to tighten for a moment. But she quickly returned to her usual gentle expression and looked at Mahiru kindly.

"… I'm not so sure about Sayo-sama," Koyuki answered. "While she is adept at handling various tasks effortlessly, I have never actually seen her

cook."

"Oh…okay." Mahiru immediately pulled back.

If Koyuki hadn't seen her cook, then there was nothing Mahiru could do.

Even just once, I wanted to have some.

Barely showing her face, a woman of few words—always rushing from place to place. That was Mahiru's mother.

When Mahiru learned that in most families, one or both parents usually did the cooking, she couldn't hide her surprise. It was only later when Mahiru had a better grasp of her situation and surroundings that she realized having a housekeeper wasn't the norm for everyone.

"Ojou-sama, would you prefer food prepared by Sayo-sama?"

In response to Koyuki's question, Mahiru shook her head. "Mother doesn't, come home… I don't want to bother her."

The number of times Mahiru had seen her mother could be counted on one hand. It was once or twice a year at most, and even when their paths crossed, her mother never acknowledged her, ignoring Mahiru for her own tasks before leaving the house once again.

While Mahiru's father was seemingly busier with work than her mother, his actions were much the same; avoiding eye contact and leaving almost as soon as he returned.

From as long as Mahiru could remember, it had always been Koyuki who took care of her and her daily needs, and she had never been left wanting for anything essential. Yet, the only emotion that seemed to grow was loneliness.

Mahiru knew better than anyone that asking to eat her mother's cooking, when she felt she'd been abandoned by both her parents, would never bear fruit. Moreover, she was too afraid of being rejected to even request it.

Koyuki looked at Mahiru, who was softly shaking her head while her hair swayed gently. Koyuki's eyebrows drew downward in a concerned frown.

"Um, I love your cooking, Koyuki-san. It's delicious every day and it always makes me happy. So, it's fine."

She didn't want to make Koyuki sad, but seeing her attempt at reassurance only darkened Koyuki's expression further. Mahiru was at a loss for what to do. However, Koyuki's somber look disappeared almost instantly, replaced by her usual warm smile. Mahiru was surprised by the change in her expression, and

what Koyuki was thinking remained a mystery to her. The only certain thing was that Koyuki had donned a gentle smile to put Mahiru at ease.

"Thank you very much, Ojou-sama. I'm happy to hear you say that."

"Um, it's not, flattery? It's really delicious."

"Yes, I know. You always seem to greatly enjoy your meals, so I understand."

"*Phew*."

Mahiru really thought Koyuki's cooking was delicious from the bottom of her heart, so she would have been troubled if Koyuki had misunderstood her.

While feeling relieved to see Koyuki return to her usual cheerful self, Mahiru watched as Koyuki packed the leftovers from dinner into tupperware containers. They would serve as Mahiru's breakfast the next morning. Obviously, Koyuki couldn't come over to her house early every morning, so she always prepared the next day's breakfast this way.

Thanks to her, Mahiru never had to worry about her breakfast. Nevertheless, eating alone each morning was a lonely affair. She couldn't bring herself to voice such a selfish desire and swallowed the emptiness she felt each day.

"Oh, how about this? Why don't we cook together sometime, Ojou-sama?" After finishing the preparations for the next morning, Koyuki suggested warmly, noticing Mahiru intently watching her cooking.

The offer caught Mahiru completely off guard; before, she'd been strictly told never to go near the stove because it was dangerous.

Mahiru's eyes widened even further as she looked up at Koyuki. "Can we really?"

"We can, as long as you promise to only do it when I'm around and watching."

"I–I promise!" For Mahiru, it was a simple enough promise to make. She had no intention of breaking it, especially when doing so might result in Koyuki leaving, a thought she couldn't bear. Besides, the idea of learning from Koyuki made her happy, unlike the notion of fumbling around on her own.

"Wonderful. Once you learn how to cook, you'll be less likely to face difficulties in the future."

"'Difficulties'…?"

"Well, for example, if you ever decide to live alone once you're older."

"But I am already?"

"…I mean when you're an adult, living independently. What would you do for food if you can't cook?"

"…I'd be hungry?"

"Precisely, you would be hungry. What should you do to prevent that?"

"Umm, buy some food…?"

If she couldn't cook on her own, Mahiru could only think of a few options: eat out, bring food home, or hire someone like Koyuki.

"While buying food can be a good option, they might not have what you're looking for. What would you do if you wanted to eat your favorite dish?"

"…Make it myself?"

"Correct. You have a lot of favorite dishes, Ojou-sama. Don't you think it would be fun to be able to make them yourself?"

"I do!"

Although the idea of properly cooking was hard for Mahiru to envision at this point, she felt confident that she would learn if Koyuki taught her. She would certainly enjoy being able to cook all sorts of dishes like Koyuki. After all, despite having a variety of things prepared for her each day, Mahiru always looked forward to the meals Koyuki prepared. She figured that her satisfaction would only grow if she could cook such meals herself. Mahiru believed this sentiment from the bottom of her heart, and when she energetically affirmed this, Koyuki also seemed relieved and flashed a soft smile.

"I'm glad you've also taken an interest in cooking, Ojou-sama. I shall teach you whatever I can."

"Even fluffy omurice?"

"Absolutely. Omurice, beef stew, miso soup, and even today's stew. I'll make sure you learn how to make them all, Ojou-sama."

"Really?"

"Indeed."

Hearing that she could recreate the dishes crafted by Koyuki's magical hands on her own, Mahiru's heart was filled with excitement.

"Will I be able to make food for Father and Mother, too?"

If I can make all sorts of dishes…

Would my parents, who never look my way, pay even a little attention to me?

I wonder if we would even be able to sit down and eat with each other.

With such expectations, yet without putting it into words, Mahiru asked

Koyuki that question.

While maintaining her smile, Koyuki lowered her eyes ever so slightly and stroked Mahiru's head.

Koyuki would usually never touch her, so Mahiru closed her eyes and fully savored the pleasant sensation of Koyuki's gentle palm tracing through her hair.

"Yes, I believe that you will be able to make it for them someday."

"Okay, I'll do my best!"

Mahiru responded with all the enthusiasm and energy she could muster, to which Koyuki gently scolded her, saying, "It's already late; you mustn't shout." With a faint hope that by doing her best with a smile, she might catch her parents' attention, Mahiru decided to look forward to the cooking classes.

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Well, my idea of things never ended up working out to be that convenient of a story.

Mahiru silently gazed at the page lined with her much younger handwriting, and while being careful not to alert Amane, who was sitting next to her, she let out a barely audible sigh.

It was to be expected, but even after she learned how to cook, Mahiru's parents never paid attention to her. Rather, even if there were opportunities for them to interact, since her parents had no interest in listening to what she had to say, it would be pointless to let them know.

Koyuki had likely reported it to them. If they had properly read those reports, they would've known that Mahiru had learned to cook.

At best, they probably skimmed through it. Now that she'd grown up, Mahiru felt a sense of resignation and accepted her suspicion as truth. But for the younger Mahiru who had put in so much effort, not being acknowledged was a harsh reality to live in.

Those letters, blurry from some liquid, conveyed the feelings of Mahiru back then more eloquently than anything else.

I was so young…and foolish.

Back then, she'd thought that if she tried hard enough, her parents would at least look her way. But now, knowing their attitudes and stances towards her,

Mahiru could assert with absolute certainty that those expectations were foolish. Still, she understood it was impossible for the child she was to understand this.

As a result, with her naive hopes dashed, she'd written this diary while crying inconsolably. It was by no means a laughing matter.

I had fostered false expectations on my own, felt like I had been betrayed on my own, and in the end, suffered and cried on my own. That was all.

Koyuki hadn't lied.

She had said Mahiru would be able to cook for them, but she hadn't said a thing about them ever eating it. Judging from Koyuki's perspective, she had likely worded it that way because she knew it would never happen. While that may sound cruel on the face of it, Mahiru was still grateful to Koyuki.

Although Koyuki knew the nature of Mahiru's parents, there was only so much she could do. Given her position as an employee, she likely had no better option, but she still didn't have it in her to break the heart of a child still clinging to her parents. She must have thought that learning the truth after growing up would be less damaging.

Thanks to Koyuki, Mahiru learned to cook many dishes, and even the dishes she wasn't taught, she could now make easily by following a recipe. Her skills had been honed to that extent. Furthermore, Koyuki had also taught her how to do general housework, likely stemming from the kindness of her heart, to make sure she could freely live on her own in the future.

Koyuki had her own family.

At the end of the day, she was a stranger—it wasn't as though they would always be together. Mahiru wasn't *her* child, she was just *a* child that Koyuki was paid to take care of. Knowing that the day would come when they would part, Koyuki had educated Mahiru from a young age so that she wouldn't face any struggles down the line.

Now, Mahiru believed that Koyuki acted more like a parent than her real parents ever had.

...I truly am grateful.

Thanks to Koyuki, Mahiru learned how to live on her own.

And most importantly, she found someone precious to her.

"Make sure you grab the one who makes you happy by the stomach."

Mahiru indeed recalled those kind, sincere words, stripped of formalities and employment considerations, that Koyuki had told her just once.

I found him, Koyuki-san.

Someone who only looked at her, who only loved her, who treasured her, and who would be happy with her. She had found him.

I hope we meet in person again someday. If we do, I'll introduce you.

Mahiru traced her fingertips over the voice of lament her younger self had left on the page.

Someday in the future, someone special who will look only at you will enter your life.

Holding back tears as she remembered her younger self facing the diary, Mahiru quietly sent her past self a message of encouragement to keep going.

Two Adorable Children

“Honestly, this is quite the dilemma.”

Shihoko sighed as she came downstairs to the living room after finishing up some leftover work. It was late at night, a time when their two children were already resting in their respective bedroom and guest room.

Shuuto, having heard her comment, pondered what could be bothering his wife. “Are you talking about your work? Did they maybe give you an unreasonable deadline?”

“Ah, no, no—that’s not it. I’m talking about what happened with Amane the other day.”

As soon as he heard the phrase ‘what happened with Amane,’ Shuuto immediately understood what was troubling Shihoko. “Ah, the incident with the Toujou family’s son.”

“Yes, that. Word also has it that he’s causing trouble again,” Shihoko began. “I heard from an acquaintance’s wife that he’s getting a little problematic of late. After starting high school, his behavior has apparently taken a turn for the worse.”

Just the other day, Amane and Mahiru had gone for a walk outside and had an unfortunate run-in with the boy who was the trigger for Amane’s decision to move out of town. This was something that they’d heard directly from Amane himself. It was probably a chance encounter, as it was hard to believe Amane would intentionally seek him out. It was entirely possible, however, that Toujou had been targeting Amane upon learning he was back in town.

“If Amane overcame that hurdle himself, it isn’t our place to intervene,” Shuuto responded, “especially seeing as nothing actually happened. If something had happened, it’d be clear at a glance from Amane and Shiina-san’s behavior.”

While they couldn't know what exactly happened unless they looked inside the minds of those involved, at the very least, Amane didn't seem troubled by the encounter. This meant the meeting had been relatively inconsequential for him. Besides, knowing Mahiru's personality, she would have likely returned with a devastated look if she had sensed that Amane was distressed and reported the situation to his parents. Thus, Shuuto inferred that it mustn't have been a big deal.

It looks like his wounds have completely healed.

For Shuuto, who was well aware of how Amane would isolate himself in the past, seeing this growth moved him deeply.

Amane was profoundly hurt after being used and betrayed, especially since they had led his other classmates to treat him harshly. Both Shuuto and Shihoko regretted not noticing the malicious activity by the Toujou family's child, and for not guiding Amane on how to properly behave around such people. Being raised with an abundance of love and with a comfortable lifestyle, Amane grew up as an earnest, pure child who never once doubted people.

Shuuto realized after the fact that enduring a moderate amount of stress during his childhood had made Amane more a resilient person than a purely sheltered life would have.

Well, I suppose as a result of that, Amane has grown into a fine young man.

In the end, Amane had become who he was today by using that unpleasant experience as a tool for self-improvement. Although in hindsight it wasn't all negative, at that time they were fraught with anxiety.

"While that may be true…as a parent, I still can't help but worry." Despite her usual teasing, Shihoko always put her son's well-being first.

Shuuto patted her head, briefly glanced towards the corridor, and then immediately gave Shihoko a smile. "If he has overcome his past experiences on his own, then I have nothing to say."

"You're rather laid-back about it, Shuuto-san."

"I wouldn't say that. I just trust Amane."

"In my case, if my precious only son were to sob, all I could think would be, 'Don't worry—mom will make it all better!'"

"If Amane heard that, he'd just counter it, saying, 'I'm *not* crying!' Besides, he probably wouldn't want to rely on you now, Shihoko-san."

"Oh, but even if he *were* crying, he'd probably seek comfort from Mahiru-chan instead, so maybe his mother isn't needed anymore. *Sniff*."

"*Sniff*, eh? Not *Sob*?"

"Don't sweat the details," Shihoko replied, playfully miming a weepy face. But Shuuto knew she was genuinely worried, so he comforted her by continuing to stroke her head.

Despite Shuuto's efforts to soothe her, her mood was still slightly sour, as though she had more to say about Toujou. "Still, this situation is tough even for the Toujou family. His parents are having a rough time."

"I agree. It's not really our place to say, but they should have addressed this issue earlier," Shuuto reckoned. "Apparently, he'd started acting out just after starting middle school."

After the incident with Amane, they had investigated and found out that in middle school, Toujou had started hanging out with unsavory individuals and the moral scales in his mind had assumedly begun to tilt.

Consequently, they had also learned of his family situation. While Shihoko felt that Toujou's parents were good people, Shuuto still remained somewhat skeptical. Indeed, his parents were good-natured, pleasant people—and Shuuto also knew that they were a polite, sincere and kind-hearted couple. Despite that, he had a suspicion that they only acted that way when around others.

Shuuto was aware that, as Amane's parents, they had failed to teach him about the shadows that can pass across even the most pure of lives, and bring imbalance to even the most well intentioned journey. Toujou's family, on the other hand, faced the challenges of a different type of upbringing. It was evident just by looking at their family that their attempt to live an upright life had distorted something, with the consequences from those attempts warping their son for the worse.

"A teenager's rebellious phase can be a bumpy road," Shihoko commented. "Though, Amane hardly ever acted out, which actually worried me instead."

"Our son had a slight rebellious phase, but it was quickly overshadowed by other circumstances."

"The timing of it all was just awful. Just as he'd reached his most impressionable age, that happened…"

"Amane's behavior was almost *too* good that it was a reason for concern. I was even looking forward to him yelling, 'You crappy old man!' at me back

then," admitted Shuuto. While he was prepared for a certain degree of teenage rebellion, Amane was naturally a quiet child and didn't put up much of a fight. If anything, he turned out to be more kind-hearted than expected, which left Shuuto feeling it was all rather anticlimactic.

"What an odd thing to look forward to."

"Well, I used to be like that myself, so being yelled at would give me a chance to look back on those times."

"… Oh, right. Father-in-law did once tell me that you only truly settled down during the transition of high school to college."

"Aha ha ha. Well, I still wasn't the kind that went around harassing people. Just fooling around with friends, really. I had enough sense to avoid crossing that line."

Shuuto hadn't meant for that remark to be a slight admonition of a particular boy—the subject of their previous conversation. But perhaps reminded by what he'd said, Shihoko let out a soft sigh, making Shuuto feel a bit of regret as well, thinking he had slipped up.

"But honestly, Toujou-san's son is the same as ever, isn't he?"

"It seems so. From what I could tell by watching Amane and Shiina-san's behavior, he seemed the same as before. If anything, I think he'd have been the one surprised by how much Amane has changed."

"Perhaps so. Amane really has changed since then."

Shuuto and Shihoko nodded in unison, once again acknowledging Amane's progress.

When they had sent Amane off, it had been with the hope that his emotional wounds would be able to heal. When he left, he had been aloof, introverted, and tended to spin his words with a blunt tone that caused his peers to avoid him. Looking at the present Amane, however, it was a completely different story.

It was hard to believe this was the same Amane from a year and a half ago; there was a newfound confidence that shone through him, evident in his bright expression, and he radiated a sense of softness and composure. For a while, Shuuto and Shihoko had been quite concerned for his wellbeing, but it seemed there was no longer a need to worry. Amane had managed to heal his wounds and develop as a person.

“It’s a relief that his change was for the better,” Shihoko continued. “I was worried about what to expect after he left home, but letting go was the right decision after all.”

“Absolutely. There are aspects of personal growth that can’t be nurtured when under your parents’ care, so it’s fantastic that he managed to grow on his own,” Shuuto said.

Shihoko chuckled softly. “Mahiru-chan was definitely the trigger. Just as one would expect from the Fujimiya family!”

“Love can serve as an effective trigger for bettering oneself, you see.”

“People don’t often change without a reason after all.”

It was true—very few people would consider changing themselves all on their own. For most, some kind of nudge or trigger was required for them to take that first step.

And for Amane, that push had simply come from Mahiru.

“I’m of course relieved that Amane overcame it quickly, but…I’m concerned that Toujou’s son might become obsessed with him. You know, like holding a grudge, maybe?”

“Given the physical distance between them, I think there’s no need to worry. Besides, while he may have gone down the wrong path, I’d like to believe at his core, he still has the good sense to avoid making such a terrible decision. I feel he simply doesn’t have the ability to truly cross that line, which is one that should never be crossed. For better or worse, the front he puts up is fueled more by his own anxiety than anything else.”

“You sound harsh, but also oddly confident in saying that.”

“That is the conclusion I came to after a fair amount of research and verification.”

“…You really don’t waste any time, do you?” Shihoko shot him a look of disbelief, to which Shuuto returned a smile.

He had indeed investigated the matter at the time and gained insight on what shaped the boy’s current actions and attitudes. From the family’s domestic situation then and now, to his parents’ work environment and educational background, Shuuto had dug into it all. And so, he had made his judgment based on a multitude of factors.

While it was true that Toujou hadn’t changed at his core and seemed to carry his middle school habits into high school, it was still all within the bounds of

youthful mischief. He seemed to be venting his daily frustrations in ways that didn't break any laws, probably falling back only to the last moral line of defense that his parents had drilled into him—at least, as far as Shuuto could see.

"I'm not the type to neglect investigating the actions and lifestyle of someone who might bring harm to my son," Shuuto clarified, "I made use of every resource at my disposal. The boy's current teachers and neighbors were acquainted with people I know, so they agreed to cooperate."

"Perhaps it was too early for an investigation?" Shihoko wondered.

"The sooner we act, the more options we'll have later on," he explained. "Am I right?"

It was far better to take the initiative than to be on the back foot waiting for something to happen. Investigating only after something had already occurred would be too late. If a situation could be prevented beforehand, then that would be the best course of action.

"He's narrowly on the edge of it being a rebellious phase—albeit an extreme one—but it seems like his parents' attempts at control are making the situation worse. That's all it is, really."

The boy was at odds with his parents, he felt suffocated but was unable to fully commit to a life of wrongdoing—that was his current situation.

"To begin with, though… I don't think Amane has any intention of living here again even after graduation, seeing as he's planning to go to college over there too. Furthermore, I haven't told anyone which high school he's going to, and Shihoko-san, you've only told people that he moved to another prefecture, right?"

"Yes, that's all. Just to be on the safe side."

"Once he graduates from college and starts working, it'll become even more difficult to track him down. I doubt that boy is obsessed enough to go that far to find him."

Had the boy fallen *too* far, Shuuto would have been far more cautious in his handling of the situation, but he hadn't crossed the line just yet. He must have also realized that becoming obsessed with Amane wouldn't accomplish anything meaningful. After all, he no longer existed in Amane's world.

"And besides…"

"'Besides'?"

“There will *not* be a next time.”

If, by some miniscule possibility, the boy tried to bring harm to Amane again, Shuuto would take the appropriate measures. They had already afforded him a chance; there would not be a second. No matter his background, no matter his reasoning, there was no more room for Shuuto to just stand by.

In the eyes of the victim, the perpetrator’s reasoning was meaningless. As Amane’s guardian, if harm had come their way, then his only goal would be to eliminate the root of the problem so that no more harm could be inflicted. That’s all there was to it.

Shuuto would make sure that he understood the full scope of what he’d done and what he was planning to do. He would pull any strings he needed to make sure that boy never appeared before Amane again.

“…To me, it sounds as though you’re the one most angry about the situation.”

“It’s not so much that I’m angry, but rather, if something poses a threat, it’s only logical to eliminate it.”

If there were insects seeking to feast on the beautifully growing tree trunk, it was only natural to deal with them. At the very least, such intervention would be sensible until the tree had fully grown and could fend for itself.

Even if the child eventually planted their roots far away and grew their leaves in a sunny spot of their own choosing, it was a parent’s natural desire to protect them until they could stand on their own.

“Isn’t that tantamount to being angry?” Shihoko mused.

“Hmm. I’m not angry—but I haven’t forgiven him either.” Shuuto didn’t harbor any lingering anger towards the boy. It was a waste of energy and mental space, and he had no plans to take action unless provoked. However, the bottom line was that he would not forget what the boy had done, nor would he let it slide.

“I never expected you to be the type to hold a grudge, Shuuto-san.”

“Well, perhaps setbacks in life are meant to be experienced at least once, but if someone repeatedly raises the axe of malice against you, it’s only right to respond in kind.”

“I was really scared at the time. I could tell you were genuinely angry when I noticed you started to investigate further using your connections.”

“It’s a parent’s job to protect their children. Since you were taking care of his emotional needs, Shihoko-san, it was easier for me to act behind the scenes.”

“…You didn’t do anything to the boy, did you?”

“I didn’t. It was the first offense, so a warning sufficed.”

“And what if it happens a second time?” asked Shihoko.

“I’m no Buddha. I’d have no reason to sit back and wait for a third.” Shuuto wouldn’t tolerate such reckless behavior a second time. Of course, he would make efforts to ensure it didn’t happen again in the first place, but if it did, Shuuto intended to eliminate him as a clear enemy the moment it happened.

“While us parents often don’t intervene in a fight between children, those fights may escalate beyond what could be considered a children’s fight. It’s an adult’s job to stop such fights before it leaves a lasting impact.”

Once bullying escalated to defamation, blackmail, or assault, it was beyond something a child could handle. It would require adult intervention, and even legal repercussions should be considered.

Although Amane might no longer be worried about it, Shuuto concluded that it was better to be prepared for anything as he leaned back on the sofa.

Shihoko wore a solemn look on her face as she replied, “You’re right,” with a small sigh. At that very moment, the living room door ushered in the air from the hallway. The sound of the hinges creaking broke the quiet of the night.

Both parents turned their gaze towards the door to find Mahiru peeking in tentatively after having gently pushed the door open.

“Oh, Mahiru-chan—what brings you here at this late hour?” Shihoko asked, instantly brightening her expression.

Mahiru stepped foot in the living room, looking hesitant. She usually wasn’t awake at this time, so she seemed to have either woken up or was having trouble sleeping.

“Oh, um…I thought I’d get some water.”

“Water? Wait just a moment—feel free to sit down.”

“Huh? Oh, no, I don’t want to impose.”

“No no, it’s okay. Don’t hold back.”

Shihoko got all excited as she stood up and headed to the kitchen. Even Shuuto, her husband, couldn’t help but smile at her sudden change of pace.

Perhaps because she was aware she was in someone else’s home, Mahiru still seemed hesitant. She timidly approached Shuuto and bowed her head slightly. “Um, I apologize for intruding.”

“Don’t worry; we don’t mind it at all. There’s no need to be so formal and apologize.”

“Precisely,” Shihoko chimed in. “You’re living under the same roof as us now.”

“She is, but only temporarily, right?”

“Oh, don’t rain on my parade. I’m the one who’s supposed to be bringing the water right now,” Shihoko interjected, “Before saying the whole family lives under the same roof, wouldn’t it be better if she started with just Amane?” The sounds of her cheerful voice and water being poured out of a plastic bottle came from the kitchen.

After a short while, Shihoko returned with a tray carrying three glasses. She handed one to Mahiru with a beaming smile. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

“And for you too, Shuuto-san. You must be thirsty.”

“I suppose so.”

Shuuto and Shihoko had talked quite a bit more than usual tonight. A quick glance at the clock showed that quite some time had passed. Shuuto, who had been the more talkative of the two on this occasion, wore a wry smile. When he took a sip from the glass, he found the water surprisingly cold, as if he hadn’t realized how heated he had become.

This always happens whenever I get absorbed in conversation. How immature of me.

Reflecting on his slight over-zealousness for the sake of his adorable son, Shuuto decided it was time to quietly cool down. Strangely, however, Mahiru looked at him with a hint of awe.

Shihoko also seemed thirsty after talking so much, since she emptied her glass and set it down on the table as well. She gave Mahiru a smile as she waited for her to leisurely finish drinking her water.

"Oh, and don't mention our earlier conversation to Amane, okay?"

"Ah—" Mahiru's face suddenly turned pale. Shihoko had openly voiced what she'd been hesitant to bring up.

Even Shihoko noticed it sounded like she was chiding her and hastily waved her hands to clarify that she meant no harm. "Oh no, I don't mean to accuse you! It's our fault for talking so loudly that our voices could be heard down the hall!"

Seeing Mahiru wear an expression full of guilt, as if she had eavesdropped, only intensified Shihoko's panic.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. You don't have to worry, okay?"

"Shihoko-san only meant that she didn't want Amane to hear because it would be embarrassing, that's all," Shuuto interjected.

"W–Well I couldn't help it," his wife returned.

Feeling like the situation was getting out of hand, Shuuto had stepped in to mediate. Shihoko's cheeks flushed slightly, and her mild distress was written all over her face.

"I know that if I worry too much, he'll tell me not to treat him like a child anymore and that he'll be completely fine. Even though I can tell he's okay when I see him, I can't help worrying as a parent. In our eyes, he's still our adorable son, even after he's become such a fine young man."

Shuuto listened to Shihoko's feelings with a smile. He was well aware of her feelings, particularly because they matched many of the worries he had been voicing earlier in the conversation. However, the mood shifted abruptly when Mahiru's face dropped in a way that left both Shihoko and Shuuto flustered.

Mahiru looked even sadder than when she had misunderstood moments before, looking as though she were about to burst into tears. Her caramel-colored eyes were so wet they looked to be on the brink of overflowing, as if holding back a flood. Yet, she clenched her lips tightly and deliberately, looking as though she wouldn't give in.

"Did I maybe say something to offend you?" Shihoko asked, worried.

"N-No, you haven't. I just thought about…how nice that sounds."

They realized right away what it was that she found enviable.

Shuuto and Shihoko had some idea of Mahiru's background and upbringing, which was, to put it mildly, the polar opposite of their own. Mahiru's parents had been largely indifferent to her, almost entirely neglecting their parental responsibilities.

For Mahiru, who had never been cared for as a child by her own parents, watching Shuuto and Shihoko care for Amane must have been hard. A voiceless scream seemed to seep from her, as if questioning why her own life hadn't unfolded in the same way. Her heartbreaking behavior led Shuuto to lower his brows.

...Any parent who makes their daughter wear such an expression is no parent at all.

However, parents are humans, too. They all have their own set of preferences, compatibilities, abilities, and circumstances. Nobody would say that a parent has no choice but to prioritize and unconditionally love their child—in all reality, they must find it within themselves to be able to do so.

Shuuto had no intention of blaming her parents for not being able to love her.

After all, that wasn't something anyone else had the right to judge lightly.

But, Shuuto had a belief.

He had a belief that once you brought a life into this world, you had a responsibility to it—even if you didn't love the child.

One simply can't discard their decision to become a parent and bring forth new life. Anyone who abandoned that role and made their child cry shouldn't exist.

Despite being a complete stranger to him, the intensity of Shuuto's disgust was staggering. He maintained a calm exterior and suppressed the frustration welling up beneath his composed face, and looked back to Mahiru. She fell silent with a more childlike expression than usual, looking like a lost child trying to endure their sorrow.

"…You don't have to be envious, you know? Because for us, you're already like our daughter," Shihoko told Mahiru, echoing Shuuto's own thoughts, who smiled at Mahiru in relief that his wife felt the same way.

Clearly caught off guard, Mahiru stammered, "Huh?"

"Oh, did I jump the gun? Maybe I've gotten ahead of myself?"

“Huh? N-No, that’s not…true? Maybe? Is it…?”

“Oh my.”

“Shihoko-san, you mustn’t tease her too much,” Shuuto jumped in. “But I share the same feeling. I consider you our daughter too.”

Mahiru’s face, which had been clouded with sadness, was now filled with confusion. Displaying their genuine feelings seemed to have stunned her into silence.

“Look at it this way,” Shuuto continued, “that late bloomer and untrusting Amane of ours has completely trusted and fallen for you. We trust you as well, Shiina-san, and it’s clear from our interactions how much of a good girl you are.”

“…I’m not really a ‘good girl’. I’m just presenting myself that way.”

“Our idea of a ‘good girl’ might be different from what you’re thinking,” Shihoko explained. Mahiru had flinched slightly upon hearing the words ‘good girl’, to which Shihoko directed a smile filled with endless warmth and affection towards her. “In our eyes, Mahiru-chan, you being head-over-heels in love with Amane makes you a ‘good girl.’”

“Huh? Ah, um—” Mahiru stammered, embarrassed.

“Come on, Shihoko-san. That’s a rather extreme way to put it,” Shuuto chided his wife, adding, “I’m sure there were better ways of expressing that.” But Shihoko showed no signs of backtracking her statement, retorting, “I thought that was simple enough to understand though.”

Worried that Shihoko’s bluntness might cause further misunderstandings, Shuuto calmly continued speaking to Mahiru, who had started to turn red from embarrassment. “…Shiina-san, you’ve taken a bit of a liking to our son, haven’t you? I can tell you care deeply for Amane, and that you both seem set on building a happy future together—not just you alone, or Amane alone, but together.”

As parents, it was clear as day how deeply Mahiru loved Amane, and how Amane, who reciprocated that love, had fallen for her. They both loved and respected each other and had the intent of building a life together. Learning that they were practically living together already put Shuuto at ease.

Knowing these two, everything will work out fine, he thought.

“After seeing you both strive to overcome obstacles together, I’ve come to think we can ‘entrust’ our son to you…as odd as that may sound. But we find

the bond between you two admirable and feel that we should offer you our support."

"Truthfully, I was a little worried about leaving things to Amane," Shihoko admitted, "so it's great that Mahiru-chan here is taking the lead."

"Oh, don't say that. Amane's growing up as well."

"I know he is. But still…" At moments like this, Shihoko had a tendency to favor Mahiru.

After chiding her with a gentle poke on the cheek, Shuuto turned a soft gaze toward Mahiru, whose expression was filled with surprise. "We've long since accepted you, Shiina-san, and we consider you to be part of our family already. So if you ever find yourself in trouble, allow us to lend you a hand."

No matter what, they could never replace Mahiru's biological parents. However, they could still offer a helping hand as the adults most involved in her life. They could lift her up if she were to fall into darkness.

"If things ever get too tough with your family, you're always welcome to come to us. We can provide you shelter, and we even have ways to adjust your family register. If needed, adoption can be arranged either by us or by one of our relatives."

"Additionally, if push comes to shove, you can even get married without parental consent as soon as you become an adult," Shihoko added. "If only you could get your independence sooner…"

Shuuto lightly stroked Shihoko's head to curb her fantasies. Still, he felt that the idea was not a fantasy at all, but a probable future. The trust and bond between Amane and Mahiru were strong, possibly even more resolute than when he and Shihoko had first started dating.

By nature, the Fujimiyas were steadfast people through and through. The feelings Amane held for her would likely never change unless Mahiru rejected him herself.

Shiina-san will take the Fujimiya name one of these days. And perhaps in doing so, she will manage to put her painful memories behind her.

"Mahiru-chan, you're still only a child. It's okay to lean on adults you can trust in times of trouble. If you ever face any problems, consult it with an appropriate adult. If you believe we're suitable to play that role, we'll support you as much as we can." Shihoko said, locking eyes with Mahiru and gripping her trembling hand. Looking down at her feet, Mahiru nodded slightly.

As her hand enveloped Mahiru's, Shihoko pretended not to notice the single tear that had fallen onto her.

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After a while, Mahiru lifted her face, and although her eyes had become slightly red, her expression had brightened considerably. Her earlier resemblance to a lost child was nowhere to be seen as she smiled at Shihoko, who had silently continued to hold her hand.

"In exchange for not telling Amane-kun about earlier, please don't let him know that I was on the verge of tears."

"Of course—it's a promise," replied Shihoko. "If either of us break it…let's see, how does a hug as punishment sound?"

Mahiru chuckled. "That wouldn't make for much of a punishment."

"Did you catch that, Shuuto-san? I really want Amane to hear this. He's become so charmless, that boy of ours."

Shihoko, who proposed the punishment herself, unilaterally decided to execute it by hugging Mahiru. Mahiru seemed happy to accept it. Watching Mahiru, who was quite content to be treated this way, Shuuto also let a smile slip onto his lips.

Shiina-san was right. This isn't much of a punishment at all.

"How cute! Seeing as the opportunity has presented itself, shall we sleep together tonight and share love stories?"

"In that case, I'll have nowhere to go," Shuuto remarked.

"Why not sleep with Amane?"

"I'd rather not wake up to a scream tomorrow morning, so I'll abstain. Plus, it's rude to enter someone's bedroom uninvited. And at his age, he probably wouldn't want to sleep with his father."

Shuuto chuckled wryly and shook his head gently, foreseeing that Amane would likely start ignoring him if he'd pulled a stunt like that. Whether they found this exchange amusing or not, both Shuuto and Shihoko locked eyes and shared a laugh, to which Mahiru responded with a subtly amused smile.

Undesired Encounter

Seriously, why now?

Ever since Mahiru heard from Amane that he'd met and talked with her own father—Asahi, such thoughts had been swirling around in her head, blocking out everything else.

To Mahiru, the concept of parents had always been something elusive, something practically non-existent in her life. She recognized those two as providers of her DNA, but she didn't recognize them as people responsible for raising her. For as long as she could remember, it was her housekeeper and de facto tutor, Koyuki, who had given her knowledge and guided her as a person, not them.

In her younger years, she had wanted her parents to see her, to be close to them. She had tried her very best to get their attention, but they never reached out in return.

No, they *refused* to reciprocate.

The people who had given birth to her, then chose to neglect her without a second thought, prioritizing their own desires and their own lives. That was how Mahiru perceived her parents. At first, she had desperately wanted to be recognized and loved by them, but they didn't even notice the despair she felt the day she realized all her efforts were in vain. They had no idea how hurt she was, nor did they want to.

They also wouldn't know that since then, Mahiru had almost no feeling left except great disappointment toward her parents, and even in spite of that, she continued to hold onto a sliver of hope for the longest time. But eventually, she stopped wishing for them to know entirely.

She had been clinging onto the ridiculous possibility of being loved—a possibility as unlikely as finding a single dust of gold in a vast river. Yet, she

was disappointed in herself for being unable to give it up. And now—just as she started to believe that she no longer needed parental love thanks to Amane's presence in her life—*this* happened.

"Why now, after all this time?"

The voice that escaped her lips was frighteningly cold. So frighteningly cold, in fact, that one couldn't possibly imagine it coming from her given her Angel voice she used in public or even the voice she used with Amane.

The point was that Mahiru's father, both in thought and presence, had become nothing more than a stranger to her by this time. She couldn't understand why this man, who had thrown all responsibility onto Koyuki and neglected her for over a decade, would suddenly seek contact. She didn't *want* to understand.

As if you can come and act like a parent now.

Expecting to be accepted as a parent when you've done nothing to deserve the role was absurd. But if one were to offer a modest defense for Asahi, it was that he at least never hurled abusive words at Mahiru. In that regard, he was better than her mother, Sayo. But, when it came to neglect, his emotional distance far exceeded Sayo's.

Sayo may have shunned and rejected Mahiru, but she at least acknowledged her existence. Asahi, no matter how much pain Mahiru experienced, offered absolutely no support and simply erased her from his mind by focusing himself entirely on work and turning a blind eye to anything inconvenient for him.

As for which of the two was better, Mahiru couldn't say. But what was certain was that Mahiru intended to neither trust nor accept Asahi, who, after all this time, was only just attempting to establish contact as a father.

Just what sparked his change of heart?

It was only natural to be wary of him suddenly acting like a father. According to Amane, who had directly met with him, Asahi had no intent to harm her. Assuming that was true, it made her all the more cautious as his true intentions remained clouded in mystery.

Perhaps understanding this, Asahi opted not to reach out to Mahiru directly. From Mahiru's perspective, however, this only worsened her impression of him, giving her an eerie feeling as if he were lurking around in the shadows, spying on them for purposes she could not understand.

Fortunately, based on the little she had sensed of Asahi's personality over

the years, she guessed he wouldn't force the issue. That's why she believed he wouldn't directly harm her. If, however, Asahi were to do anything that would place her at a disadvantage, Mahiru had the option to consult child welfare services, with the testimonies from her diary, her teachers who knew about her parents' lack of involvement, and Koyuki, who had been the closest person to her.

About the diary, she had told Amane that she used it to chronicle memories and events—which was true—but apart from that, it also served as evidence. Everything she had experienced up until now had been recorded clearly, including the emotions she felt at the time.

While she wasn't entirely sure if what had occurred up to now qualified as child neglect, Mahiru suspected that if an investigation were performed and it became public knowledge, it could very well affect Asahi's social standing from nothing more than the implication. For the sake of protecting herself and her livelihood, she wasn't afraid to retaliate with maximum force.

I am *hoping it won't come to that, though.*

Mahiru didn't wish to make a big deal of the situation. She preferred to keep her distance and continue with her current life while not getting involved—like she always had. She was curious about her father's intentions seeing his sudden change in behavior, but if getting involved would jeopardize her current way of life, then she'd rather remain ignorant.

After all, Mahiru no longer needed parental affection.

To be realistic, she might need her parents' financial support. However, she already had enough funds to cover her future college fees. Thanks to the large sums of money they transferred into her account each month—almost as if to claim that money could solve everything—she had enough to cover her living expenses until halfway through college. The account, the passbook, and the personal seal were all fully under her control, so it wasn't something that her parents could interfere with.

The amount of money she possessed was staggering for a high school student, but it was akin to child support for her and something resembling compensation for neglect.

Her parents were no longer people from whom she expected love. They were closer to objects of fear that threatened her life.

She no longer needed them.

Even if they were to reach out now, she was neither naive nor desperate enough to grab their hand. After all, Mahiru now had someone else's hand to take.

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As always, whenever Mahiru arrived at Amane's house, Amane greeted her with a warm expression. Even after the incident with Asahi the other day, his demeanor hadn't changed. Or more accurately, it seemed like he was taking extra care to be accommodating without letting it show on his face, or perhaps was even pretending that nothing had happened.

Amane's approach—neither treating her like a delicate object nor touching upon sensitive topics with insensitivity—was something that Mahiru was grateful for. Prompted by Amane, she then stepped into the living room, where a slightly chilly atmosphere greeted her.

Knowing the usual temperature setting, Mahiru was aware that the air conditioner mustn't have been turned up too high, yet she still felt a mild coldness in the air. She snuggled closer to Amane, who smiled softly and took her hand, to which they sat down on the sofa together. Once seated by his side, Mahiru looked over at him—his expression was the same as always, but she noticed a slightly affectionate look in his eyes.

"Amane-kun." When she timidly uttered the name of the person she loved, she received a smile as warm and mellow as the spring sunshine.

That smile, warm yet enveloping, could even thaw snow before it, and it seemed to momentarily clear the fog that had been swirling deep within her heart. Yet, what had swelled within her from the other day's events still hadn't vanished completely. At the core of that fog was the heavy clump of years of concentrated emotions, which Mahiru could neither forget nor shake from her mind, and that was only brought further into the light as she was reminded of it by recent events.

"Hm? Is something wrong?"

Mahiru's eyes wandered upon hearing Amane reply in a voice so unbelievably serene yet familiar, and she was at a loss for what to do. It wasn't that she wanted him to do anything in particular. She had simply come to him

wanting to be by his side.

"…Well, erm…could you hold my hand, please?"

After some thought, Mahiru made that small request.

The only hand she wanted to hold was Amane's.

Maybe she wanted to confirm that for herself once more.

With a slight hesitation, Mahiru had made her request. Amane responded with a gentle smile, then enveloped her hand with his. It was the first thing she wanted to touch her—a slightly bony, somewhat rough, yet sturdy hand. A gentle hand that had always touched her with utmost care.

Just being held and caressed by that hand made her feel so relaxed that she could almost lose her strength.

"Is holding hands all you want?" Amane asked if that was enough for her, his voice tender but tinged with playful curiosity. Wondering whether it was appropriate for her to fawn over him any more than she already had, Mahiru lowered her eyes.

In the end, there was no additional contact from Asahi. Everything seemed to have gone back to normal as if nothing had happened. But Mahiru hesitated and shut her mouth.

Is it okay for me to rely on Amane-kun even more? I'm simply fretting about this all on my own.

As if sensing her hesitation, Amane tightened his grip on her hand for a moment before gently letting go.

"*Ah*." As she let out a small gasp, a blanket was placed over her head.

"…You seem chillier than usual today, Mahiru. Maybe I set the air conditioning too high. Here, wrap yourself in this blanket."

Saying this with a smile, Amane wrapped Mahiru's still-chilly body in a blanket. He then slipped his arms around her back and the back of her knees and effortlessly lifted her up, laying her across his lap without a moment's hesitation.

As Mahiru gently landed sideways on Amane's thigh, she blinked in surprise, and the obsidian eyes that peered into her narrowed with affection.

"Warmed up now?"

"…Yes." Mahiru felt warmth rush to her eyes.

Amane was embracing her without any reservation, and yet he deliberately refrained from touching on any inner worries she may have. To ensure that the

warmth wouldn't dissipate, he offered her a tender smile.

He may have thought Mahiru was putting on a brave face, but that was fine by her. She had faith that Amane would accept her for who she was, no matter what.

An almost strained sigh escaped her, but Mahiru didn't look at Amane's expression. Instead, she rested her cheek against his strong chest.

I'm no match for him.

Amane saw right through her—through her personality, her trivial pride, and the anxieties she couldn't completely erase on her own. He anticipated it all, orchestrating this situation that Mahiru couldn't refuse. He did all that so Mahiru could feel naturally at ease, even if only slightly.

Aware that Amane was respecting her feelings and not pressing her to reveal more than she was willing to share, Mahiru exhaled softly.

I really love this part of him as well.

Watching her own parents had sometimes made her question the very concept of family. For Mahiru, the idea of a happy family had always been a fantasy, something she couldn't quite believe truly existed. But meeting Amane and seeing how he was treated made her realize that there could be families who genuinely cared for and respected each other, taking each other's hands through life.

He had grown up in what she very much envied—an ideal family. And that made him all the more dazzling to her.

I would…rather have Amane-kun.

Born into a family that, as their daughter, was far from admirable even in her eyes, Mahiru had never favored the idea of spending her days with someone else or building a family. But meeting Amane taught her hope. Being so gently enveloped and cared for by Amane made her think anew that she could walk into the future with him, that they could find happiness together.

It was at that moment that she realized how open she was to the idea of that kind of life-long relationship with Amane in the future. She couldn't help but feel a little flustered, and writhed around within Amane's arms.

Yes, I love him very much, and yes, I never want to be apart from him again. But still!

Could their relationship be too heavy for high school students to bear? Mahiru understood that nine times out of ten, high school relationships didn't last. With that in mind, thinking about their future at this stage was likely a little—no, *quite*—heavy indeed. She knew that Amane also loved her deeply and that he intended to be with her for a long time, but consciously thinking about marriage carried a different kind of weight.

Mahiru let out a soft moan, overwhelmed by her own strength of attachment and affection. Amane, of course, was unaware of the emotional whirlpool inside her, and simply stroked her back gently with a worried look.

"…Um, Amane-kun?"

"Hm?"

"…Is it not too heavy for you?" Mahiru didn't specify the subject of her sentence, which perhaps was unfair.

Amane blinked several times at Mahiru's question before laughing lightly. "Don't worry, it's not heavy to me at all. Are you that worried about it even though I've been training?"

"It's not that I'm worried exactly, it's just that…"

"You often let the small things get to you, Mahiru. Don't worry about it. Just lean on me and depend on me. If it helps you relax even a little, I'll lift you as many times as you want." Amane likely grasped both of the meanings in Mahiru's words and chuckled. "You show restraint during the strangest times," he added. He might not have grasped the *real* meaning behind 'heaviness' that Mahiru hadn't actually expressed, but that was enough for her. It was enough for her that Amane accepted her.

"Look, if you're struggling or anxious, just tell me. Well, sure, I might not be able to do anything about the root cause of it, and it'd be wrong of me to take it on myself as your pain is yours alone," Amane said. "…But, what I *can* do, Mahiru, is stay by your side until you overcome that pain."

"…Yes."

"You can let it all out if it makes you feel better, but you don't have to. It's up to you. I'll just accept whichever way makes you most comfortable."

Amane's unfaltering stance of leaving the choice to Mahiru made her feel reassured from the bottom of her heart.

...I'm truly glad I fell for him.

She let her body relax and leaned into him.

"…I'm okay." Mahiru had no intention of venting about her family issues to Amane. She had already done that some days ago. The torrent of gray emotions inside her might be too overwhelming for her to tackle alone. But as long as she had Amane by her side, Mahiru felt she could accept these deeply rooted negative emotions and memories and move forward. "Erm, well, it's not about putting up a front or bottling it all up or anything like that…I just believe these are things I need to put behind me in order to move on."

No matter how much she vented, the woes, the sorrow, and the grievances of her younger self would continue to gush out inexhaustibly. In the end, so long as the root cause remained, they would eventually resurface. To move forward with Amane, Mahiru felt she had to untangle the twisted form of attachment to her parents she had since childhood, which was deeply rooted in her longing for them.

This was also to prevent her from making any further mistakes.

"…Got it." Amane said quietly and continued to stroke her back.

"Simply having you by my side is more than enough," Mahiru continued. "Your presence brings me great comfort."

"You've gotta be exaggerating."

"It's the truth, you know?"

If she hadn't met Amane, Mahiru's future wouldn't have been as bright. She wouldn't have been able to trust anyone else, or even have been capable of loving someone from the bottom of her heart. She would have lived bearing an insurmountable resentment towards her parents.

In all likelihood, she would've walked through life in solitude, under a perpetually clouded sky.

"…I'm fortunate to have met you, Amane-kun."

A solemn murmur escaped Mahiru's lips. Without saying anything further, Amane gently embraced her, wrapping her in his warmth.

That Which Shines the More You Polish

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Having washed away the day's fatigue and sweat with a refreshing bath, Amane returned to the living room to find Mahiru engrossed in a book on the sofa. It was already past ten o'clock, a time by which she usually would have gone home. Yet, for some reason, she remained.

Amane had assumed that she'd head home while he was in the bath, and had even wished her goodnight right before stepping in.

"You haven't gone home yet? I totally thought you had already left."

It didn't bother him if she stayed late; after all, they were dating and lived next door to each other. This time of the evening was probably just within the realm of acceptable.

But Mahiru probably has stuff she needs to do at her place, Amane worried.

While she likely had taken care of what she could do at Amane's place and even seemed to have bathed at home before coming over, he wondered if she didn't have her own routines or errands to attend to.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was planning on going home before you got out of the bath, but…I wanted to reach a nice stopping point first."

It seemed she had been engrossed in solving her reference book. Mahiru was the kind of student who studied the material given to her ahead of time, so she wasn't as pressured as other students might be. Nonetheless, being the diligent and perseverant person she was, she never skipped reviewing her work. She was probably going through exercises in the reference book to reinforce her understanding, even though she likely already knew the material.

"Wow, you're really putting the effort in. Well done," praised Amane.

"Thank you," replied Mahiru.

As Amane sat next to her and stroked her head, Mahiru squinted her eyes

ticklishly. He considered running his fingers through her hair, but decided not to as his hands were still damp from the bath, making it difficult to do so without messing up her dry hair. When he lifted his hand from her head, Mahiru showed a hint of dissatisfaction.

She's become so easy to read, Amane thought, smiling slightly. Mahiru's dissatisfaction accumulated like a balloon in her cheeks, and after being caressed by Amane, they deflated, a mist of restrained emotions she failed to contain escaping her lips.

While gently tickling her cheek, which was so well-cared-for that he felt inspired to learn from her example, Amane glanced into the reference book Mahiru was holding and found the content quite advanced compared to what they were studying. However, thanks to the fact that he also did some pre-study and learned from Mahiru's revision sessions, he understood it for the most part.

Mahiru really is amazing, he silently thought, feeling grateful.

"Can I borrow this for a little while after you're done? I'd like to go through it too."

"Sure, I don't mind," replied Mahiru. "I've actually solved this multiple times already, so you can have it. I have other reference books I can use."

"Nah, there's no rush, really. Don't mind me."

Amane didn't want her to prioritize him and turned down the offer. He simply thought it would be nice if she let him borrow the book, and had no intention of inconveniencing her with his selfishness.

"I don't really mind. I still have plenty of reference books on the same topic at home."

"…Seriously?"

"I'm not kidding, of course. The more you solve problems in reference books, the better your practical and application skills become. That's why I do them multiple times and even buy fresh books to get new questions. I find solving them enjoyable."

Amane could only be bewildered by her nonchalant attitude. Well, he understood the concept of having multiple reference books for the same subject as he had a few himself. However, judging by Mahiru's tone, it seemed she had quite a considerable number of them, impressing Amane, who hadn't been as thorough in that regard.

He could relate to the feeling that the more you solve, the more you

understand, making studying enjoyable. But this moment reminded him yet again that Mahiru was far more diligent and hardworking than he was.

"…Alright, I'll borrow it, but don't prioritize me too much, Mahiru."

"It's not so much about prioritizing. It really is okay—once you're done solving them, I can simply solve them again later. Amane-kun, aren't you prioritizing *me* too much?"

As if to get back at him, Mahiru poked Amane's cheek and tickled it with her fingertip. Amane gently squinted his eyes in response, letting her have her way, but suddenly Mahiru came to a halt. When he glanced over, wondering what the matter was, he found Mahiru intently staring not just at his cheek, but his entire face.

"What's wrong? See a pimple or something?" asked Amane.

He had checked his skin while doing skin care in front of a mirror earlier, and as far as he could tell, there was nothing out of the ordinary, neither by sight nor touch.

Maybe I'd missed something? But as he contemplated that while recalling his reflection in the mirror, Mahiru gently shook her head, her flaxen hair swaying.

"No, quite the opposite. Your skin has improved, hasn't it?" Mahiru remarked.

"Ah, so that's what it was. Had me worried for a second there."

"Your pores, the dryness, the feel of your skin—it's all different now. Seeing it up close, I noticed right away that your skin has gotten better."

"I'm surprised you could tell all that, honestly." Given that Amane himself had been rather indifferent about such details until recently, he couldn't help but be amazed by Mahiru's keen memory and observational skills. "But it is nice to see some progress. I've been focusing a bit more on my skin care routine lately."

"Oh, did you alter your routine?"

"I did, yeah, but I'm still not as thorough or spend as much money on it as you might, Mahiru. I just make sure to cleanse and moisturize properly now."

These two basic steps alone could make a big difference in one's complexion. After some research, Amane had changed his skincare products. Before, his skin was neither bad nor particularly good—the epitome of average—and he used to get by with basic face cleanser and some random

moisturizer. But given that he set out to improve himself, he thought he might as well do some research and change his cleansing and skincare products.

He tried several types and chose the ones that best suited his skin, focusing solely on careful and thorough moisturizing. That was all he did, but changing the approach improved his skin condition. Thanks to Mahiru's cooking, his meals were already very well-balanced from the start, so compared to the past, his skin must have improved remarkably.

"Great. Men tend to have more sebum than women, so proper cleansing and moisturization are especially crucial."

"Your cooking made it really easy to get the diet part down, Mahiru. So I mostly just focus on skin care and quality sleep. You make it look easy, but it's tough maintaining your beauty like you do. Doing this made me realize that while you have naturally good looks, those good looks are only maintained through your incredible hard work."

"Thank you very much," Mahiru giggled softly. "I'm happy to see that you recognize my efforts."

"I can tell just by looking. I know that you're always striving to improve yourself. Actually, I remember you telling me about it before. It really is impressive."

Amane recalled Mahiru's past words about the importance of ongoing effort for future gains. She had noted that beauty faded with time, and that she wouldn't live relying solely on her appearance. But that wasn't to say she wouldn't continue to polish her beauty. It was that she would polish not only her appearance but also her skills and qualities as a person, and she has remained true to her word.

Amane understood all over again how incredible her dedication was.

"…Thank you. Though it's a little embarrassing that you remember all that," Mahiru said.

"How come? It just means you're doing your best, doesn't it?"

"…Well, if you think so, then that's fine."

Mahiru seemed to struggle to say something, mumbling hesitantly.

Did something happen to make her embarrassed…? Amane tried to recall their past conversations but nothing in particular came to mind.

Wondering what she might be overly sensitive about, he tried to read her expressions, but Mahiru seemed disinclined to answer and avoided eye contact.

Even so, when he kept his gaze on her, she retorted with a voice that was a mix of both chiding and reproach, saying, “You don’t need to worry about it.” Sensing that prying further would only sour Mahiru’s mood, Amane quickly judged it best to let the matter go. “Sorry,” he said lightly, pushing the lingering question out of his mind.

“…Speaking of which, what made you so conscious about it, Amane-kun?”

“Huh?”

“While you were focused on working out, you didn’t pay much attention to the finer details before…so I was wondering if there was a trigger.”

“Well, you know…once you start paying attention to one thing, you start noticing everything else, too. When I started researching the best ways to work out, I found myself getting more and more concerned about other parts of my daily life, like skin care.”

Amane hadn’t initially planned on being as meticulous about his appearance as Mahiru, but given his personality, he figured that if he was going to make an effort, he might as well do it as best as he could within his means. So he decided to research various ways to improve himself, aiming to be a person worthy of standing next to Mahiru.

In today’s Digital Age, desired information was just a click away, although you still needed to be cautious about its credibility. After finding methods on how to boost his allure as a man and ways to improve himself, Amane scrutinized them carefully before putting them into practice.

In practice, it wasn’t anything particularly complex. Focusing on specific parts of his body that he wanted to improve through targeted training, giving special attention to skincare because a person’s impression is often influenced by complexion and skin texture, ensuring quality sleep to improve his complexion, experimenting with techniques to achieve that, and consulting Itsuki and Yuuta to refine his fashion sense by finding out which colors and styles suited him best. He was currently in the midst of implementing these various self-improvement plans. He wasn’t putting in the immense amount of effort that Mahiru was, so it wasn’t anything he felt overly proud of, but he made sure not to neglect the effort itself.

“I think it’s a great thing, whatever the reason may be. The road of self-improvement is an endless one, so I simply recommend you continue what you’re doing until you feel reasonably satisfied.”

“Will do. Well, I figure that if I can achieve something with just a little effort, it’ll pay off many times more down the line.”

“That attitude of not neglecting the effort is important in itself. You’re doing well,” Mahiru praised. “Now, allow me to spoil the hardworking Amane-kun a little.”

Just as Amane knew about Mahiru’s efforts, Mahiru was well aware of Amane’s efforts too. Knowing he’d been jogging and working out before dinner, and had further exhausted himself in the bath, she flashed a tempting, almost mischievous smile and opened her arms wide. The blouse she wore was thin, and he could see more than he expected beneath its fabric.

“…Say, Mahiru. Do you realize what you’re suggesting is dangerous?”

“Oh, it’s not dangerous. It’s just a tight hug.”

“*That’s* what makes it dangerous, young lady. Do you follow?”

It might be a different story if Amane were the one doing it to Mahiru, but with their roles switched, it posed a significant issue. They were lovers, so one could argue there should be no problem. However, when it came to Amane’s self-control, there was indeed a considerable issue. He had once buried his face there before, and the sensation was both pleasant and very much *un*pleasant.

As Amane casted a skeptical glare at Mahiru as if to question whether she truly understood the situation, Mahiru slowly traced her lips into a curve. She gently extended her opened arms toward Amane—then softly touched his hair.

“…You just wanted to fluff my hair, didn’t you?”

“Oh, was it that obvious?” Mahiru chuckled elegantly. Realizing he’d been teased, Amane slightly furrowed his brows, but Mahiru just laughed even more, seemingly amused. “You don’t want me to?”

“…No, that’s not it.”

“Then, does it make you happy?”

“…Why do you ask?”

“Oh, you know, just because you don’t dislike it doesn’t mean it necessarily makes you happy, does it? I thought it would be odd to do something so wishy-washy.”

“…W-Well, it does make me happy, alright? It does, but still…”

Feeling her touch his hair, or being pampered by Mahiru, made him happy. It did, but it was a complicated feeling. If he gave in and indulged in Mahiru’s embrace too openly, he felt he would lose somehow.

“Then isn’t that fine? Maybe come here?”

“Wh–What I mean is, the location is a bit tricky. Is it really okay for me to bury my face there?”

“Oh? If you think you can handle it, go ahead.”

She knows. She definitely knows when she says that. Amane felt sure that Mahiru was inviting him with full knowledge that he wouldn’t behave recklessly. *How devious is that?*

Amane lightly shuddered at the devilishness of his own girlfriend as he looked at her. For her, whether he hugged her or not probably didn’t matter. If he did hug her, she would certainly indulge him. And if he resisted, she would likely shift to petting his hair and pampering him in that manner. He could see it all unfolding like that. Feeling a bit vexed at being so completely in the palm of Mahiru’s hand, he hesitated, agonized, and then finally reached out.

“…Don’t you think you’re being sly?” Mahiru said.

“Who’s the sly one here?” As Amane buried his face in Mahiru’s shoulder and whispered, her body seemed to tremble ever so slightly, as if she were bashful.

Amane, too, understood that he couldn’t take advantage of this situation to nestle his face into her chest. If he were to speak his true feelings, as a man, he certainly did have the desire to savor the sensation of her soft curves. He wanted to be enveloped in her warmth through a full embrace.

However, if he allowed himself that liberty, it would lower the hurdle for more intense forms of physical affection in the future, which would lead him into doing something even more extreme. So, he restricted himself, opting for this manner of contact both as a personal restraint and as a cautionary measure.

Isn’t this already skirting the line? As he gently pressed his lips against the nape of her neck and nuzzled her, Mahiru, who seemed to have given up on her hug strategy, shifted to Plan B: stroking his head with one hand.

“There, there,” she said.

“It feels like you’re treating me like a kid,” Amane pointed out.

“You often do it to me too, do you not?”

“I–I don’t remember treating you like that.”

“And I’m not treating you like that either.”

Unable to argue that the suggestion could be interpreted as either treating him like a child or like a lover, Amane could only remain silent.

“Good boy, good boy.”

“…Now you *definitely* sound like you’re treating me like a kid.”

“You know, interpreting my compliments that way would be problematic for me.”

“It’s your tone.”

“Even if you say that…” Mahiru whispered in a voice filled with gentle affection, akin to how one would a child. This left a strange feeling in Amane, who, as a sign of his discontent, lightly tapped on her back with the arm he’d already wrapped around her. However, Mahiru was seemingly unconcerned as she simply continued to gently run her fingers through his hair.

“Don’t try to pamper me,” Amane protested.

“Huh? No can do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, hard work deserves recognition, and there must be a reward for said hard work.”

“E-Even so…come on now…”

...I’m still not convinced that earlier suggestion is the way to go, Amane inwardly pointed out as he raised his face. It felt less like *Amane’s reward time* and more like *Mahiru’s reward time*. In fact, that’s exactly what it was, and Mahiru appeared genuinely disappointed as they separated, letting out a regretful sigh. “*Ah*...”

After cooling his thoroughly flushed cheeks, Amane gently peered into Mahiru’s face.

“Look, I’ve only just started putting effort into things that you’ve always given your all. You’ve constantly been working hard, much more than me. So if you’re going to praise me for what I’m doing, you should praise yourself for everything you’ve done too.”

While it would of course be difficult to offer another *reward time* like the one he just experienced, Amane thought it was still necessary to praise Mahiru anew and to pamper her a bit. Granted, he also had a tiny ulterior motive: if he genuinely praised her from the bottom of his heart, Mahiru might feel overwhelmed and become unable to pull stunts like the one from earlier for a while.

Amane continued, “You’re amazing, Mahiru. You’ve worked so hard all this time. Working on myself daily reminded me of that. You make it look like it’s

the most natural thing in the world, but doing this takes a lot of time and effort. On top of that, you're also studying, doing housework, and taking care of yourself, aren't you? I really admire you."

While he was praising Mahiru intentionally, the content and sentiment were all genuine, coming straight from the heart. Spending almost all his time with Mahiru, except for when they were bathing or sleeping, Amane was reminded anew of the extent of her efforts.

She carried out these tasks as if they were second nature, yet the struggle behind them must be tremendous. Amane himself had taken over most of the household chores aside from cooking, thanks to being at home, which had probably lessened her load to some extent. Still, she had her own household responsibilities, and the collective work was likely considerable.

Despite this, Mahiru continued to work hard, never showing any signs of displeasure. She consistently engaged in her self-imposed regimen of self-improvement. Her actions dazzled Amane—he couldn't help but admire her greatly, and it made him want to support her in any way he could.

"*Ah, um—*"

"I want to follow your example, Mahiru…I want to work even harder and strive to the point where I can be confident and proud of myself. I won't be satisfied with myself otherwise. Of course, being praised by you is a great feeling and I'm grateful you do, but I don't want you to offer it easily like just then. I want to be showered with praise and to be pampered like that only when I've really, truly worked hard."

Otherwise, Amane would never last.

When he looked straight into her eyes and made his request, Mahiru, evidently overwhelmed and embarrassed by the praise, averted her gaze.

"…R-Really, Amane-kun, once you set your mind on something, you're so straightforward…or even resolute."

"You think so? I feel like I slack off quite a bit."

"That's called *taking a break*," Mahiru retorted.

"But I procrastinate too much to call them 'breaks', honestly."

"In what way, exactly…?"

In what way? Every way, I guess. Amane didn't consider himself as resolute as Mahiru's comment suggested. If anyone fit the definition of 'resolute,' it would be Mahiru herself.

Amane's approach was to put in the effort within his capabilities while taking breaks as needed. He didn't drive himself to the point of breaking either physically or emotionally. He could foresee that doing so would not only lead to his own breakdown but also bring sorrow to Mahiru.

It was likely thanks to his well-balanced approach and perspective that he managed to elicit such a comment from Mahiru.

"To be perfectly honest, I never hated myself, but I never liked myself either. I had nothing to be proud of—I was just lazy."

"…If we're talking about the you I first met, I can't deny that," admitted Mahiru.

"Exactly… Now, I want to come to like myself. It's not that I disliked myself when I couldn't work hard, but wouldn't I prefer a version of myself that has goals and strives for them?"

Ultimately, Amane's lack of self-confidence stemmed from his own self-dislike—his lazy, irritating, excuse-laden, cowardly past self. Now that he had begun the work of becoming a man worthy of Mahiru, overcoming past humiliations, regrets, and fears, transforming them into something more elevated, Amane finally felt he was on the path to liking himself.

"Besides, I also just want to be a good man."

"As in, you want to become popular?" Mahiru asked.

"N-No, it's not about that. Like I said before, I want to have confidence in myself, and a confident man is generally considered a good one. So if I want to stand proud next to you, I must become a good man."

"Amane-kun…"

"Well, I still have a long way to go."

While he wasn't setting unrealistic expectations, becoming a man good enough to match the girl who smiled beside him was a high hurdle. Yet, he had no intention of giving up.

He wouldn't say it was for Mahiru's sake. Amane intended to keep working hard for his *own* sake, to gain the self-confidence and pride in himself that he desired. "That's why, because I'm not yet satisfied with myself, I plan to work hard for my own sake."

"Yes. Once again, I shall support you in becoming the person you want to be, Amane-kun."

"Thanks."

It was different this time. Before, Mahiru supported him without fully understanding why he wanted to put in the effort. Now, she understood his reasons and still chose to give him a push. Amane was well aware that Mahiru loved him as he was and could easily have said, "You don't have to work so hard. I'll still love you." The fact she chose to respect his decision meant more to him than anything else. It gave him the resolve to become a man that would make Mahiru fall for him all over again.

"Alright, I'll do my best then. I want you to fall for me even more."

"E–Even more than I already do!?"

"Yep. I mean, it would make me happier, and having a respectable partner would make you happier, Mahiru. Sounds like a win-win to me."

Amane would be over the moon if Mahiru already loved him more than anything else, but there was still the possibility that her feelings could grow if he became an even better man. After all, Amane's affection for Mahiru knew no bounds, so it stood to reason that Mahiru could feel the same way too.

If it meant being loved by her even more, there was absolutely no reason to hold back on his efforts.

"…If I fall for you any deeper than this…I'll be unable to lead a normal life anymore," Mahiru replied.

"You're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not."

Mahiru's self-discipline is incredible. Could she even lose control of herself like that? Amane was skeptical about the possibility, but it seemed that Mahiru herself genuinely feared that prospect. She wore an expression that seemed to say *'Don't tease me'*, to which Amane apologized and used his fingertips to soothe her almost puffed-up cheeks. That energy then moved to Amane's lips, forming an arc.

"Well, if that happens, I'll take responsibility for turning you into such a mess."

"…I will hold you to your word."

"Sure. Remember it well. I won't make you regret it."

Since Mahiru had chosen him from among many men, there was no way he would let her regret her choice. In response to Amane's firm declaration, Mahiru opened her eyes wide, biting her lip momentarily.

"Amane-kun, *you ladykiller*."

“How did it come to that!?”

After Amane’s eyes widened at her inexplicable suspicion, Mahiru promptly turned her face away in a huff.

Through the Eyes of an Onlooker

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Amane-kun, would you like to go shopping with me?"

It was a certain day off, some time after Amane and Mahiru had begun dating.

Mahiru's visits to Amane's house had become a daily occurance, and Amane, who heartily greeted her with a "Welcome," was promptly met with this suggestion from Mahiru, barely pausing in his greetings.

Mahiru had brought up the idea while they were on their way to the living room, making it clear as day that Mahiru was eager to go. Typically, she was quite reserved in expressing her desires. She seldom voiced her wishes when she wanted something, wanted to *do* something, or wanted to go somewhere, and when she did, she often prefaced it with *"If you don't mind, Amane-kun, could we…"* So, when Mahiru explicitly asked him out like this, it meant there must be a clear purpose for wanting to go shopping with Amane.

"Sure, why not. I don't have any plans today."

After they both sat down on the sofa and Amane agreed, Mahiru's face noticeably brightened up, making it almost impossible for Amane not to smile in response.

Did it make her that *happy?*

Seeing her smile bloom so suddenly made him feel delighted as well. "Did something catch your eye?"

"Yes, well, various things did."

"Gotcha. Leave carrying the bags to me."

Amane thought that perhaps Mahiru was happy to go out with him, but it also seemed like she might need him as a walking pole hanger to hang shopping bags on. Recently, Amane had gained a decent amount of muscle, so he could

handle a bit of weight. Determined, he then looked at Mahiru with a spirit of readiness.

But, her now-dampened eyes returned him a look of exasperation. “Geez, why is that your first thought…? I simply wish to go shopping with you, Amane-kun. Emphasis on the ‘*with.*’ Do you understand?”

Amane had been half-joking, but Mahiru seemed to want to clear up any potential misunderstandings, highlighting her point with a smile. The pressure was potent enough that it left Amane overwhelmed and he obediently nodded, “Oh, right…yeah, I understand.”

“Really, geez. I want to go with you because there are items I want to pick out with you, okay? It’s not as if I’m using you as a bag carrier. You know that, don’t you?”

“Sorry, sorry. My bad for not understanding a woman’s heart.”

“That’s better.”

Whenever Mahiru scolded Amane, or whenever she sulked, she would playfully thump on his body, a gesture that had increased since they started dating. Amane secretly smiled as he recognized this behavior of hers. After a while, Mahiru seemed to have calmed down, her playful thumps turning into gentle pats. Seizing the moment, Amane reflected on the question Mahiru had adorably asked just moments earlier.

“So, what’re you gonna buy?”

But strangely, as soon as he asked about what she wanted to buy, Mahiru suddenly sealed her lips.

“Mahiru?”

Despite her strong desire to go shopping, she fell silent the moment he asked about the specifics. The drastic change in her mood left Amane puzzled, but he noticed Mahiru glancing his way tentatively.

“…Um, you won’t get upset or think it’s weird, will you?”

Now I really *wonder what it is that she feels like buying.*

“You should know by now that I don’t get upset easily.”

“So, you won’t think it’s weird?”

“There aren’t many things that can weird me out. Still, I won’t know until you tell me what it is.”

Mahiru was a fairly sensible person, so Amane found it hard to imagine she would buy anything that would make him uncomfortable or upset.

Whatever it is, she wanted to shop for it with *me, so it can't be anything out of the ordinary.*

And yet, her hesitation suggested it could be something she felt awkward about.

So it's not anything weird, but instead something Mahiru might not be comfortable telling me, Amane racked his brain. *Yeah, I'm completely lost.*

Something that Mahiru's okay with but might make me do a double take or get upset when I see it… If Mahiru's expecting that sort of reaction from me, then could it be…lingerie?

After intense thought, Amane surmised that lingerie being the item was indeed a valid possibility. But it was hard to believe that Mahiru of all people would brazenly suggest this without getting embarrassed, as she wasn't the type to show such things to others. And since there was no *physical intimacy* between Amane and Mahiru, it seemed out of character for her to suggest choosing something like that together with him.

Then, what on earth does she want to buy? Amane hadn't an inkling as to what it could be.

"…U-Um, you see, it's just that…" Mahiru struggled her words out, "you know how I've been spending more and more time at your place?" Her modest voice began trying to clear Amane's confusion.

"More and more? You're pretty much always here now, apart from when you take a bath or go to sleep."

"We have…started dating, haven't we?"

"Yep."

"So, um…i–if it's okay, may I keep more of my personal belongings here too?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure."

In other words, Mahiru wanted to keep more of her belongings at Amane's place, being considerate about the design and how it looked since it was, when it came down to it, *his* home. This was a request so adorably modest that Amane felt ashamed of his earlier baseless and vulgar speculations that had popped into his mind. Without letting his internal turmoil show, he readily and without hesitation accepted Mahiru's meek request, causing her eyes to widen in surprise.

"…What a quick answer," she said.

“Well, you do spend most of your time here, Mahiru. It’s natural that you’d need more of your things the more you’re here.”

Mahiru already had a few of her personal items at Amane’s place: hair care products, some reference books, writing materials, and recipe books—the bare minimum she needed. Amane had never found them bothersome. Fortunately, his apartment was unusually spacious for a single occupant, a deliberate choice made by his parents who were particular about security, convenience, and location. Though Amane had once thought it would be far too big for him, he was now very grateful to have such a spacious apartment since he began spending time with Mahiru.

He gently tapped Mahiru’s head as if to encourage her to bring more of her things, to which she looked up at him hesitantly.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“…Um, i-is it…okay if we get…m-matching items?”

“Matching items?” *Matching what, exactly?*

Sensing Amane’s confusion, Mahiru continued shyly. “As it is now, the dishes at my place and yours are mixed up, aren’t they?”

“They are, yeah.”

Amane had only prepared the very bare minimum he needed in terms of dishes. He was living alone and wasn’t confident in his cooking, so didn’t see the need for any more. He’d brought cheaper dishes he had from his family home, and they had been decreasing in number over time due to breakage—mostly Amane’s doing. Since Mahiru started coming over, they had been using a mix of his and her dishes. Although they tried to match the colors the best they could, the lack of uniformity on the dining table was apparent.

“So, um, I want to…use the same ones.”

“…Sure.”

“B-But, it isn’t as if we’re lacking dishes, so if it gets in the way…”

“Sure, let’s go buy some. The ones I have are just the most basic cheapest stuff I could get, and there’s plenty of space for more.”

Amane could never refuse Mahiru’s wish for matching items.

“Actually, you should know more about that stuff than I do, Mahiru. You’re in my kitchen more than I am and you’ve seen how I accidentally break dishes sometimes. If anything, I wanna get some more too.”

Mahiru was undoubtedly more familiar with the kitchen, understanding the

number of dishes and space available. Amane sensed her hesitation to buy new ones was due to uncertainty about whether it was okay to buy them on her initiative and where the funds would come from. Amane was on board with the idea for the former, and as for the latter, Amane still had about a third of money left in his account that was set aside for him when he moved in.

He had never been one with material desires and had gotten by with items brought from his parents' home or arranged by them, so he hadn't bought much of anything himself. Besides, thanks to Mahiru's everyday efforts, their food expenses were considerably reduced. Amane, being someone who bought only what was necessary, actually hadn't been wasteful with his money.

Consequently, since Amane had quite a bit of money left over in his account, buying a few more things wouldn't pose a problem for his living expenses. He was deeply grateful to his parents, who allowed him to live alone and ensured his well being, even though it must have cost them an extra penny. He had no intention of mentioning this specifically, but even if he did, his parents wouldn't mind his request to buy matching dishes with Mahiru. In fact, they might even say something like, *"Preparing for your new life together is important,"* and possibly transfer even extra money to him.

"…I don't want to force you."

"I know, but I also agree that having matching dishes would make it feel more like we're eating together."

"…Yes."

Since Mahiru, who had initiated the conversation, became hesitant, Amane reassured her by hugging her and gently rubbing her back. Mahiru quietly leaned into him, nodding happily.

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Not wasting a moment's time, Amane promptly accompanied Mahiru to the shopping mall, following her lead to a particular store. According to her, *"Inside this store is the dishware that caught my eye."*

Amane wasn't typically a fan of crowded malls and found Mahiru's familiarity and efficient guidance reassuring as she pulled him along energetically, a step quicker and more buoyant than usual. He couldn't help but

smile, enjoying her navigation without pointing out her obvious excitement.

They soon arrived in front of a store that appeared to specialize in Scandinavian dishware. The shop had an elegant ambiance at first glance, with chic music playing inside that tickled the ears. The dishware on display was sophisticated—simple yet classy—and Amane thought they perfectly suited Mahiru's taste.

"The items here aren't too expensive, and they have elegant designs and great durability. I use them at my place too," Mahiru explained.

"Oh, so you wanted to share what you liked with me. That's why you brought me here so eagerly."

"Sh-Should I not have? Um, if they aren't to your liking, Amane-kun, we can browse in some other stores."

"You dummy, why do you sound like I'm blaming you? I'm just happy you're showing me the stuff you like."

Amane, not having a strong preference for dishware, appreciated that Mahiru wanted to choose items she liked. Since they would share the dishware, choosing something they both liked was best. He had learned from his parents that the secret to harmony was to compromise wherever he could. Therefore, it felt only natural for him, who had no particular preference, to let Mahiru, who clearly had a preference, take the lead.

"Both of us would be happy if we used things that you like, Mahiru. Wouldn't you feel happy if you saw me enjoying what I liked too?"

"I would, of course."

"Then that's great."

Amane was grateful that Mahiru, like him, could delight in the happiness of her lover. If their values had been vastly different, it could have led to complications later down the line. Feeling the greatness of his parents, who boldly lived by the principle that being happy together doubled the joy, Amane held the now delighted Mahiru's hand and entered the store.

The dishes, neatly aligned on the shelves, were all tasteful in appearance. Amane wouldn't think to use dishes that had realistic, pastel-colored floral designs, but here, the floral designs were more patterned and abstract-looking. The clean lines and color schemes were something Amane wouldn't mind using regularly.

"We should focus on buying sizes we'll use often. I tend to choose designs

that stand out to me, but if they're an impractical shape or size, I just end up storing them away," Mahiru murmured, carefully selecting among the many options.

"I understand that feeling," Amane said. It was similar to choosing clothes. Often, he would buy something he liked the design of, only to find it didn't suit the season or the color didn't match his existing wardrobe, eventually becoming just another unused item in his closet.

The fact that I don't go out much is a big reason too, though.

As someone who didn't dress up for anyone, the emptiness of realizing a purchase was a waste, even though it was to his liking, was something Amane had experienced several times. The same applied to dishware. No matter how much he liked the design, if they weren't practical for everyday use, it was pointless. If the size or shape was inconvenient for serving food, they might soon end up forgotten at the back of a shelf, never to be used again.

"We also need to consider things like the size of the dining table since we'll be using them together."

"Yeah, my table isn't exactly massive."

Another issue was space. Amane's dining table was designed for just one or two people. He had bought something compact since he hadn't expected to host anyone and didn't need more space for himself. However, it now seemed like he'd shot himself in the foot.

"I was living alone back then, but I wish I'd picked out a bigger one now."

"Well, perhaps we can consider purchasing a larger one down the road. For now, we can make do with what we have."

"True."

If the table ever becomes an issue in the future, let's consider buying a new one, Amane mentally noted. For the time being, he moved around the store, following Mahiru's lead. Being a store that Mahiru liked, she often stopped to carefully evaluate the items, making it hard to decide.

"Hmm, it's hard to choose. They all look lovely," she said.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

"I already had so much fun just going out together. I'm in such high spirits that I might end up buying things we don't need."

"It's okay to splurge once in a while though, especially since you're usually so prudent with your money."

“That’s no good! I might forget our objective in coming here if I do that, so please be my brakes, Amane-kun.”

“Leave it to me.”

I highly doubt I’ll need to do that with how strong Mahiru’s self-restraint is, but sure. Despite that thought, Amane nodded anyway. Mahiru seemed even more delighted with his response and eagerly began comparing dishes, unable to decide between the options in front of her. As her boyfriend, Amane found her adorable in this state and couldn’t help but smile as he watched her.

He wondered if perhaps he should voice his opinion, but he didn’t want to dampen her enjoyment. Mahiru looked as though she was on cloud nine and muttered “These dishes might suit the home well,” and placed a simple flat plate with small flowers and an ivy pattern around the rim into the shopping basket hanging on Amane’s arm. She clearly looked pleased.

“…Are you particular about the dishes at your place too?” Amane asked.

“Yes, I am. I carefully select my favorite ones. To me, it’s a nice feeling to eat food from one of my favorite plates, or even just one that’s pretty.”

“Yeah, I get that. It’s visually appealing and somehow makes the food seem tastier.”

Even the generally indifferent Amane knew from experience that attractive dishes made food seem more delicious and increased his appetite.

“If the meal itself was the only thing that mattered, leaving the frying pan or pot directly on the table and eating from paper plates would be the most convenient way to eat. It minimizes the washing up,” Mahiru went on. “But doing that lacks grace.”

“It would make things way easier, but it wouldn’t make for a great experience,” Amane agreed.

“Taste is most important, yes, but appearance matters too. It’s like people, the first impression is crucial.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that, honestly.”

Amane had thought that Mahiru, often judged by her appearance, wouldn’t offer her opinion on such matters. However, she shook her head with a wry smile.

“It’s like cooking. You can’t develop an appetite if the food is messily served, right? If you don’t take the first bite, you aren’t able to appreciate the taste.”

“Yeah, I do see what you’re getting at.”

“And the same applies to people. A positive first impression makes others more inclined to interact with you, and it becomes easier to build a deeper connection. Well, in the case of people, it’s less about being attractive or beautiful, and more about appropriate hygiene and cleanliness. People who fail to maintain a basic level of appearance don’t usually inspire others to engage with them.”

“*Ouch*.”

“Why do you seem hurt by that?”

“Oh, you know, it’s just that I used to not care much about how I looked until a little while ago.”

Amane hadn’t paid much attention to his appearance until he started making an effort to walk alongside Mahiru. That’s why he saw himself in her words. He used to think it was enough just to be hygienic—his clothes were often unironed, and his overgrown bangs created a gloomy aura. He wasn’t *un*hygienic, but he lacked any hint of freshness, something he now reflected on with regret.

“Your appearance never felt unclean to me, Amane-kun, though you did look a bit gloomy, and your room *was* a mess.”

“Thanks a bunch for helping me out back then.”

Mahiru giggled. “Now you’re even able to do it without my help. You’re doing great.”

“Yeah, I can’t just keep relying on you for everything.”

“It’s great you have a goal in mind.” Mahiru tried reaching up to pat his head. “Good boy, good boy.” But when Amane stopped her, her face clearly showed her disappointment. However, the disappointment shown in her cheeks was soon recolored with embarrassment once Amane then succinctly said, “We’re in public.” He wished to refrain from receiving outside headpats and was relieved to have stopped her just in time, even though he felt a bit regretful.

“A-Anyway…” Mahiru continued in a slightly flustered voice, embarrassed by her near mishap outside. “Using dishes that are pleasant to the eye really enriches the dining experience and your mood. But I also want to consider your preferences, Amane-kun.”

“I don’t really mind what you choose. Like I said earlier, I want whichever one you want, Mahiru. I trust your eye for detail, and I also want to like the

things that you like."

"…Please stop flirting out of the blue like that," Mahiru retorted.

"I really wasn't though."

"Geez."

Mahiru directed him a quizzical look, but Amane felt he wasn't flirting at all, making her glance feel more akin to an accusation than anything else. Without a hint of anger, she showed a cute pout, saying "You're *always* like this, Amane-kun," a line he'd heard plenty of times before.

Mahiru then put two dishes she had apparently chosen into the basket. "Of these two, which do you prefer?"

She showed him a plate with blue and yellow geometric patterns against a white background, and another with beautiful mint green adorned with white foliage. Neither looked too flashy but had the kind of beauty that would make them suitable as decorative pieces. Amane, who generally leaned toward brighter, clearer colors for clothes, pointed to the one with blue and yellow patterns.

"I like this one, but what about you, Mahiru?"

"Okay. In that case, shall we get a matching pair?"

Mahiru quickly accepted his choice and returned the other plate to its original place before adding two of Amane's chosen plates into the basket. Amane felt a bit uneasy, wondering if it was suitable for Mahiru to rely on his choices for something she was looking forward to.

"That's fine by me, but are you sure you aren't holding back for me? We can just go with the one you like, you know?"

"Why do you think I am holding back…?" Mahiru asked in return. "Like I asked earlier, I wish to decide together with you, Amane-kun. I like both of them equally as much, so choosing the one you like out of the two would make using them more enjoyable, wouldn't you agree? I, too, want to like the things you like."

Having his words mirrored back at him, Amane truly understood what she meant by *"You're* always *like this, Amane-kun."* He swallowed the mix of embarrassment that swelled from deep within his chest and the joy surpassing it that soon followed.

"…Yeah." He nodded, and Mahiru, seemingly satisfied with getting her way, smiled brightly and sidled up to Amane's arm.

“Now that we’ve narrowed down what we prefer, let’s pick one out together, shall we? …Is that okay?”

“Sure is.”

This must be the joy that comes from being happy together, Amane thought, as a deep sense of bliss seeped into his heart. While immersing himself in this happiness, Amane returned Mahiru’s gentle smile with one of his own as she took his hand.

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After choosing plates and soup mugs to use together, Mahiru stopped by a section of the store unrelated to dishware. Though primarily a dishware shop, it seemed to carry a general range of kitchenware, including but not limited to general cooking utensils. She was drawn to a display shelf lined with bento boxes and water bottles furnished with vibrant designs. “Can we browse this section too?”

“Sure, why not,” Amane answered. “But you already have some bento boxes though, right? Did they break?”

“…No, I mean for *you*, Amane-kun.”

“For me?” Amane blinked in confusion, surprised that she had suddenly mentioned him.

“Oh, it appears you don’t fully understand,” Mahiru began to explain. “You see, our portion sizes are different. While it’s less than the average guy, you still eat more than I do. Hence, my lunch boxes might be a bit small for you. Plus, using tupperware instead somehow feels uninspiring.”

“O-Ohhh.” Amane realized what she meant.

Since they started dating, Mahiru had often made him lunch since they could eat together. And when they did, they used her lunch boxes: a multi-tiered one when eating together, and a two-tiered one with both compartments packed with food when eating with friends, though the rice balls were prepared separately.

Truth be told, Amane wasn’t particularly fussed about the type of container. However, Mahiru had strong opinions against using tupperware. She insisted, *“I simply cannot let you carry it around in tupperware. It doesn’t match the look, so to speak,”* and Amane simply went along with her wishes.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble you go to,” Amane apologized.

“I don’t prepare lunch for you every day, and it’s either prepared in advance or leftovers from dinner when I do, so it isn’t that time-consuming. Besides, you say that, but you also help me prepare them in the mornings after getting out of bed, don’t you? It makes me happy when you say it’s delicious, so it isn’t trouble at all.”

“Still. As always, I appreciate it. Thanks to you, I get to have delicious food every day.”

Amane knew that other high school boys would be green with envy over his frequent delight in her cooking. Inwardly, he bowed to Mahiru, acknowledging her extraordinary compassion and kindness. Her care for him was not just angelic—it approached that of a goddess.

“I should be the one thanking you,” Mahiru chuckled, “you make it seem so delicious when you eat it.”

Her ever-so-gentle nature was something Amane deeply valued, yet he still felt as if her cooking for him was a great burden to her. He couldn’t ask her to prepare him lunch every day.

As Mahiru mentioned, the side dishes were often extras from dinner or made using pre-prepared ingredients. However, the *dashimaki tamago*, which she almost always added—or rather, Amane had *asked* her to add—was always meticulously prepared fresh in the morning. That, and marinated dishes that were seasoned and left to rest overnight were also cooked in the morning. She did all that, despite it originally being a time she could spend resting.

Amane was truly grateful. In fact, one could argue that Amane ought to return the favor and make Mahiru’s bento instead. While he often assisted her in the kitchen, the bulk of the effort was undeniably hers. It seemed only fair for Amane to prepare their lunch from time to time.

“Can I try making lunch next time?” Amane suggested the idea.

“*You*, Amane-kun?” On Mahiru’s face was the most surprised expression she had shown all day.

“Oh, are you worried my skills can’t hack it? Pretty sure I can handle it now.”

Mahiru knew of Amane’s current culinary ability. Still, her knowledge of his initial lack of skill might still cause her some concern, in spite of his considerable improvements. His recent success in preparing dinner for Mahiru

was proof of that, having been met with a positive reaction. Amane's offer to handle preparing their lunch, while somewhat impulsive, was backed by a solid confidence in his ability to manage it effectively.

"No, I don't think anyone who has watched you cook recently would call you a bad cook. You've become quite adept, and your food is definitely delicious."

"Thanks."

"B-But, what made you think of doing it?"

"Ah well, I can't just leave everything to you, now can I? It doesn't feel right. Besides, I wanna try making one for you too, Mahiru."

Mahiru already had a lot of responsibilities on her plate. Amane wanted to share them with her, and intended to do so if possible. He understood that while someone could be more than happy to do something for someone else, it didn't necessarily mean it would also bring the other person joy. But if it was fine by Mahiru, Amane would gladly make her lunch. He wanted to create a cycle of joy where they both enjoyed giving and receiving.

"Can't I?"

"N-No, I'm delighted you want to, but…um, are you sure it's okay?"

"Which?"

"…When I eat it, people around us might see the food." In other words, Mahiru was suggesting that other students in the vicinity may judge how the food looked.

"Uh, I guess there's nothing we can do if that happens. But if anyone actually says that, first just tell them I made it."

"The *very* moment somebody says that, I would consider distancing myself from them. Should the worst come to worst, I will cut ties with them."

"Isn't that a bit extreme?"

While Amane wasn't about to prepare unappealing food for her, his priority was primarily Mahiru's satisfaction. If she enjoyed his food, then it was fine by him even if other people criticized his skills. However, it would appear that Mahiru wouldn't take too kindly to anyone insulting her boyfriend.

"I mean," Mahiru continued, "if somebody was aware that my boyfriend had put in a lot of effort into making it and *still* openly criticized the food, I can only assume they would make negative comments again on later occasions. Not that I ever recall befriending anyone that would do that, however."

“I’m not one to talk, but you’re pretty selective with who you keep around, huh.”

“I realize how this sounds, but I believe it’s important to choose your friends. I don’t wish to allow people who would harm either myself or those I care about into my social circle.”

“Well said.”

In this context, Mahiru’s criteria for choosing her social circle were based on whether they were beneficial or harmful to her. People were—some more than others—influenced by those around them. Put simply, people were shaped by their environment. If their environment was toxic, that could lead one down an undesirable path.

“…As a matter of fact, Amane-kun, you don’t prepare unappetizing food anymore, so I believe it won’t be an issue after all.”

“I do try my best, but who knows.”

“Nobody knows how well you’ve improved at cooking better than I do, Amane-kun. I’ve been watching you all this time.”

Mahiru’s deep trust didn’t contain even a shred of doubt about his ability, which caused a warm sensation to spread through Amane’s body.

Touched, he broke out into a smile. “Then I’ll make sure to fully show you the fruits of my labor.”

A mischievous smile played on Mahiru’s face as she responded, “I shall be looking forward to it, okay?” applying some pressure.

“Sure, but don’t get your hopes up.” Amane lightly tightened his grip on her hand and then muttered, “Guess I’ve gotta try my best not to let you down.”

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“Is there anything else that we need?” After placing their chosen dishware and new bento box into the basket, Mahiru had confirmed that they accomplished their primary objective. She then wondered whether they needed any other items. “There are mugs, but we have already purchased matching ones before.”

“Hmm, maybe some cutlery?”

“Oh, right, cutlery. It would be lovely if we could buy matching ones.”

Mahiru was in agreement, reasoning that since they had already chosen

matching dishware, complementing them with coordinating cutlery would indeed be the ideal choice.

"Having suggested that, the spoons and forks we have are simple in design, so we are effectively using the same ones already. I would like to find chopsticks that match too, but I expect this store won't have any."

The store mainly sold Scandinavian dishware. While they did appear to display chopsticks with cute designs on the side as bonus items, they had no options that should complement Japanese cuisine and its ingredients.

"I suppose we must look for another store," Mahiru then reckoned.

"Yeah. Using chopsticks can be a hassle sometimes because I've got so many different ones. I don't mind the chopsticks themselves, though."

"It's very easy to mismatch them when you're in a hurry, after all. That is, unless you separate them all in advance."

Since sorting them was too much trouble, they were currently using mismatched chopsticks: some were from a hundred yen store with the same pattern but different colors, and others were your regular old plain, straight wooden chopsticks. It would have been easier to just discard the extras, but they kept using them as is out of laziness. Consequently, not only was it a hassle to choose the correct pairs, but the cheap chopsticks even began to peel. This made the storage area a cluttered mess.

Amane ideally wanted to pick out a robust and good quality pair, in line with Mahiru's motto of making the most of what you had for as long as you could. However, even Amane could understand that for chopsticks, going to a specialty store would be the safest bet.

"There's a store in this mall that sells chopsticks, so shall we make our way over there? That way, we might be able to find, um, matching ones."

"Sure, let's do that. Oh, but Mahiru, your hands are smaller than mine. If we get ones the same size, I don't think you'd be able to use them properly. So let's get them in different sizes if we're picking out ones that match."

After squeezing Mahiru's hand, "*Hmph*," Amane heard her let out a quiet sound of discontent. He too wanted to get chopsticks with a matching design, but intentionally buying ones the same size would make using them trickier. There wasn't any need to match them to that extent.

"It's because your hands are small and cute."

"You're poking fun at me, aren't you?"

“Not at all. I’m happy they’re small, see? They fit perfectly in mine.” After momentarily letting go of Mahiru’s hand, Amane lightly grasped it again, this time covering it from above. Her small palm fit effortlessly into his without struggle.

As Mahiru’s gaze alternated back and forth between Amane and their perfectly intertwined hands, he chuckled. “See? A perfect fit, right?” He then noticed that the faint frown which had started to form on her face had now eased.

“…I shall let it slide just this once.”

“Thanks for letting me off the hook,” he joked. “Alright, let’s wrap this up and pay.”

Although Mahiru wasn’t big on being called small, she humbly accepted being praised as cute. At this, Amane smiled secretly and looked around. *Gotta find the registers…* Spotting them a little further inside, he was about to make his way over when he overheard what seemed to be a nearby couple happily chatting.

“Hey, doesn’t this look pretty sweet?”

“Whaaat, really? Looks super lame!”

“Oh c’mon, don’t say that.”

“Just kidding, sheesh. We’re gonna be living together starting today. It’s a very special occasion, so we have to choose carefully.”

Apparently about to start living together, the couple was happily picking out dishes while huddled close together. They both laughed while lifting up and inspecting various items. Their conversation, full of warmth and enthusiasm, was so lively that it made even an onlooker feel its intensity. They continued to fill their basket with dishes, laughing joyfully together all the while.

Seeing them, Amane stopped in his tracks.

Wait a second, he thought.

Is it possible that everyone else nearby saw us the same way too…?

The moment Amane realized that, a heat so intense rushed to his face that he thought it might burst into flames. He could feel a burning itch rise as if his face was being seared. The couple themselves seemed to be oblivious to Amane and Mahiru's presence and soon moved to another section of the store.

"Amane-kun?" Mahiru shot him a worried look, noticing that he had stopped walking. However, Amane couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye.

"…Hey, can I say something I just realized?"

"Yes?"

"…Don't we, uh, kinda look like a couple that's shopping for stuff to live together?" Engulfed in a heat too intense to endure alone, Amane attempted to dissipate the flames that threatened to scorch him by sharing it with Mahiru. Almost immediately, he saw her beside him, similarly engulfed in an intense fervor as if she too was on the brink of being consumed by the flames.

"Li–Li–Live toge…" Mahiru's voice, a quiet stammer, trembled with such intensity that it almost formed a melody. Gently, she lifted her free hand to her flushed face. Her cheeks, matching Amane's in hue, were painted a deep crimson.

Still, Mahiru never released their intertwined hands. This behavior only served to further fuel Amane's flames. Her body trembled suspiciously, and she took several deep breaths to calm herself before finally looking back up at him. A vivid mix of embarrassment and confusion reflected within her caramel-colored eyes as they glistened on the verge of spilling over. Beneath

those layers, a profound warmth and a hint of sweet anticipation flickered, subtly revealing deeper emotions.

"…N-Not yet," she muttered, "it's still too…soon."

"T-True…yeah. It's still too soon."

It was still too soon.

Uttering those words, Mahiru hurriedly led him by the hand toward the register, looking as if she might run away without a moment's notice. Amane, while trying his utmost to calm the heat within him, rolled the words '*not yet*' around in his mouth, following her lead to the register.

The Name I Will One Day Call You by

“(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs.”

Mahiru never once dropped her formal speech, regardless of who she was speaking to. Her stance never seemed to change whether she conversed with those older or younger than her. Teachers, classmates, and even underclassmen received the same polite treatment, as did store clerks, neighbors, and even lost children.

So, what about special people in her life? To them, too, her way of speaking remained unchanged. Her closest friend, Chitose, and even her boyfriend, Amane, were no exceptions.

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“You always speak formally to everyone, don’t you, Mahiru?”

Curious, Amane couldn’t help but ask this after dinner. Mahiru blinked upon hearing his question, her long eyelashes fluttering. While he felt somewhat guilty for the abrupt question, it was too late for regret now that the words had already left his mouth.

Mahiru, not looking particularly offended, replied with a smile, “Well, yes. I’ve gotten so used to it at this point that I don’t even think about it anymore,” as she sipped her tea.

“Is there a reason you always use formal language?” Amane then asked, further intrigued by her reply.

Mahiru gently set her cup down quietly on the table and looked downward, deep in thought. “Hmm…it’s somewhat difficult to explain.”

“What do you mean?”

“The biggest reason is that I simply want to sound polite…but there’s also that I prefer to maintain a certain distance between myself and others.”

Clearly struggling to articulate her reasons, Mahiru furrowed her eyebrows and wore a somewhat troubled expression, perhaps sensing Amane’s gaze.

“You know how when you interact with someone to a certain extent, you naturally grow closer? Both physically and emotionally.”

“Well, yeah. That does happen.”

“About that, I’m the type of person whose personal space is quite large, so even if I grow somewhat close to somebody, if they invade that space, I can’t help but set some distance between us…it’s almost like a reflex.”

“Do you dislike it when I invade your space too?”

“N–No, of course not! I wouldn’t have sat next to you in the first place if I didn’t want you to enter my personal space!” Truth be told, Amane had posed that question while anticipating some sort of denial, but the sheer strength of her rejection still managed to be somewhat overwhelming. “Umm, it’s not as if I’m trying to alienate myself or anything… It’s hard to articulate, but it might be appropriate to say that my choice of words reflects my wish for the other person to not further invade my personal space. It’s now a habit of mine.”

Amane understood what Mahiru was trying to say. Fundamentally, she was sociable and treated everyone with a smile. But at her core, she was somewhat introverted and preferred to spend her time quietly and peacefully. This trait was especially prominent in her private life—it was clear she wasn’t fond of letting people get too close. Even when she was with Amane, they weren’t constantly engaged in conversation as they were quite content to quietly do their own thing a lot of the time. Still, she never once refused his close presence. In fact, she welcomed it with a smile. She considered him special, and this wasn’t a luxury afforded to anybody else.

It added up that Mahiru tended to be sensitive to people invading her own safe space. It was as if a sort of defense mechanism was at work. Her use of polite language appeared deliberate, serving as a kind of wall that Mahiru erected.

“It’s a way I hold others at bay, so my reasoning isn’t very endearing to be honest,” she sighed, her face grim. She then twirled a strand of her hair around her finger. “I can be quite twisted, can’t I?”

“As your boyfriend, I think you’re incredibly straightforward and easy to

understand."

"…No, I am twisted."

"Look at you getting all embarrassed."

"Please don't tease me."

Her face flushed, Mahiru launched a (weak) direct attack on Amane's thigh as he sat beside her. He couldn't grasp what it was that was twisted about her, but Mahiru herself seemed wholly convinced that she was.

"…I don't believe in authentic, genuine friendships," she murmured with a sigh, her voice softer yet more monotone than usual. "Of course, I don't mean to claim that they don't exist anywhere. But I think that people's social relationships continue because there are benefits to be gained. Whether the person in question wishes to enjoy a kind of material or emotional gain, I won't discuss specifics. But if there were nothing to be gained, people would no longer stick around."

While what Mahiru was saying could be considered a somewhat extreme view, it added up. Essentially, every relationship had its pros and cons, and people fostered it based on an understanding of those.

Even friendship was sustained because spending time with that person brought one joy, happiness, or peace—mental benefits. On the flip side, if the drawbacks like distrust, discomfort, or risks from maintaining that friendship outweighed the benefits, then it was only natural that the relationship would end.

While some might criticize the idea of calculating friendships based on gains and losses, at the end of the day, everyone unconsciously made judgments based on whether they found the relationship pleasurable or not.

"While this is embarrassing to admit, and may show how self-conscious I can be, I feel as though there aren't many who approach me in good faith. I'm aware it's not *everyone*, but plenty of people have approached me on the basis that they see benefits in growing close to me."

Amane felt a pang of pain in his chest, sensing that her words, underscored by the sighs she had been heaving, undoubtedly stemmed from her own personal experiences. It was easy to imagine that she had grown all too accustomed to receiving both good and ill intentions, and Amane couldn't help but bite his lip in a sense of helplessness.

Her past friendships were indeed a result of Mahiru playing the role of an

angel, but this made it all the more evident that not all of those relationships were positive.

"People tend to believe they can get academic help from someone cute, or they want to be friends with a popular girl to improve their own reputation. Or, as a safety net to not be ostracized by others. As for the bad intentions—well, some men desire me as an accessory, or as a sort of 'trophy'? And then there are girls who pretend to be friends just to pick up guys whom I have rejected…there's been a variety, to say the least."

Her voice, full of weariness and lacking spirit, revealed clearly the hardships she had endured. Amane couldn't help but instinctively stroke her head in a comforting manner.

Mahiru's voice and expression was laden with a kind of emotional strain that seemed to accumulate just from recalling her past experiences, which filled Amane with a sense of heartfelt gratitude and a desire to tell her 'well done for enduring so much.'

His brows were furrowed in concern, so Mahiru hastily clarified, "Of course, there are also people who genuinely like me and approach me even as the 'Angel,'" her voice taking on a slightly brighter tone. But if her expression just moments ago was any indication, it was clear that she had struggled a great deal to come to terms with her experiences.

"In any case, that is why I have maintained a line between myself and others by always using polite language and behavior. If I treat everyone the same, people who try to force their way into my life will naturally be ostracized by everyone else…although that isn't a great way of handling things."

By leveraging her standing at school, she had managed to deter people from exploiting her. This was a social skill Mahiru had acquired through the difficulties she had faced with human relationships—likely a defense mechanism of sorts.

"…You really have been through a lot," Amane remarked.

"Still, I can't deny that my own perceptions may have influenced some of those experiences. I won't argue if you say I'm overly self-conscious."

"Nah. Seeing how popular you were, calling it 'self-consciousness' doesn't really…"

Things were calm now that it was now widely known she had a boyfriend, but Mahiru's popularity before they started dating was out of this world. There

were always people gathering around her, both male and female, and according to her, she was regularly confessed to. While it wasn't to the extent that a crowd followed her wherever she went, there were almost always a few people by her side, and instances where she was alone were few and far between.

However, it was also true that, as Mahiru claimed herself, she wasn't often seen with any particularly close friends. It was understandable especially after seeing how Chitose aggressively pushed her way through—the relationships she had with other students seemed to only be superficial at best.

"I don't worry about it as much anymore." assured Mahiru. "After all, I'm surrounded by plenty of kind and wonderful people now."

Amane saw no falsehood in her smile.

Their current classmates were mostly rational and mild-mannered individuals. Those who had kicked up a fuss during the sports festival seemed to have given up, as they hadn't approached Amane or Mahiru with any ulterior motives since then. As for the girls, they, for some inexplicable reason, adopted a quietly watchful and friendly demeanor.

Amane and Mahiru were very grateful that they could date peacefully, thanks in large part to the understanding nature of their class.

"Actually, the reason I started using formal language wasn't initially for that reason," Mahiru added.

"'Initially'?"

"Umm…I suspect that you'll be even more concerned if I tell you." Mahiru responded in a voice filled with reluctance, as if she herself was the one more concerned. Amane struggled to grasp the reason for her hesitation and blinked repeatedly. Then finally, as if making up her mind, Mahiru continued.
"…Doesn't formal language make me sound more like an honor student?"

"Ah," A sound escaped Amane's lips.

And at the same moment, regret hit the back of his head like a blow, as if telling him he would have been better off not asking.

"When children our age are learning all sorts of words and using them without thinking about their meaning or how the recipient will interpret them, speaking politely, kindly, and gently would…at the very least, make one appear to be a very 'good girl' to adults, would it not?" Paying no mind to both Amane's voice and the regret that had surfaced on his face, Mahiru continued.

Her expression was incredibly soft and serene, as if she were demonstrating

how a ‘good girl’ should act right then and there. That smile only intensified Amane’s regret.

“What a fool I was, trying so hard with nothing to show for it.”

Those words Mahiru had once spoken continued to circle endlessly in his mind, refusing to leave.

“Back then, I tried so hard to be seen as a ‘good girl,’ for them to look my way. Looking back, I think I was being quite twisted.”

Mahiru, after nonchalantly claiming once again that she was twisted, looked at Amane with a mix of concern and slight panic when he remained silent. “Of course, I no longer feel the same way now. It’s more like an old habit of mine, so I don’t really think much of it anymore.”

Likely concerned for Amane, Mahiru offered a gentle white lie. In response, Amane couldn’t bear it any longer and simply enveloped her from the front in a full embrace. Although her body tensed for a moment, she quickly relaxed and leaned into him. That alone was enough for Amane to feel that she truly trusted him.

“…You don’t have to be a ‘good girl,’ Mahiru. I will continue to like you no matter how you speak.”

“Y-Yes, I know.”

“Then take it to heart even more.”

“…Okay.”

Amane loved everything about Mahiru.

He cherished every facet of her—whether it was the way she acted out the role of a ‘good girl’ like she had just self-deprecatingly mentioned, how she could be severe and somewhat exclusionary toward others, how she could be lonely despite being afraid to deeply accept others, or in the way she claimed to be twisted but instead remained genuinely good-natured and felt guilty about wearing a mask. Every aspect of Mahiru was dear to him.

By no means did Amane only fall for the surface-level good qualities that Mahiru had. Including the darkness she carried, Amane found Mahiru incredibly endearing.

As he conveyed this, holding her gently and stroking her back, Mahiru seemed slightly embarrassed and squirmed about in his arms. She made no move to escape and stayed there in his embrace, comfortable as ever. This was testament to the fact that she accepted Amane just as he accepted her.

“Th-That may worry you, but um…truthfully, that’s not all.”

“It isn’t?”

“Yes. I mean, Koyuki-san was the one who really raised me, wasn’t she?”

“Yeah…she was.”

“Ah, I didn’t mention that to make you feel bad for me, okay!?”

Thinking back to Mahiru’s upbringing, Amane had nodded, feeling a bit blue despite it not being about him. In turn, this made Mahiru act slightly flustered.

“Um, what I want to say is, you learn a lot from the people who are always around you. Take Koyuki-san, for example. She always used polite language. Part of it had been because she was employed, of course…but she treated everyone that way. I thought that attitude she had was incredibly elegant and wonderful. I wanted to be like her, so I suppose you could say I imitated her in that regard.”

“I see…” Amane paused briefly. “If you say that, then it wasn’t just the way she spoke. Her manners must’ve also been elegant. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have admired her enough to imitate her, would you?”

“Correct.”

Just knowing that Mahiru’s behavior wasn’t solely for the sake of being a ‘good girl’ was enough to make Amane feel relieved.

The more he heard, the more Amane realized how crucial Koyuki’s existence was to Mahiru. It was easy to imagine that without her, the Mahiru he came to know wouldn’t exist, so it was only natural to believe that she was precious to Mahiru. Seeing how much Mahiru admired her, Koyuki must have been an extraordinarily kind and noble person.

Amane had never seen her, but someday, he wanted to meet Koyuki, the woman who guided Mahiru. Although it wasn’t his place to say, he wanted to go and thank her himself.

Amane felt that Koyuki would be pleased if he could show her the Mahiru he knew today, even though he had never met her before. Seeing Mahiru’s immense trust in her made him happy that a person like her existed in Mahiru’s life, causing a soft smile to spread across his face.

She must have been a truly wonderful person, he mused. As he tenderly caressed Mahiru, who remained agreeably pampered in his arms, a sudden thought came to him.

Koyuki was the initial reason Mahiru started speaking formally, but there were a multitude of reasons she *continued* to use it. She wanted to prove to her parents that she could be a good child, and she wanted to erect an invisible barrier between herself and others for self-preservation.

...But if that's the case, Amane thought, *wouldn't it be okay for her to drop the formality now?*

"Just wondering, but doesn't that mean you aren't relying on speaking formally anymore?" Amane then asked.

"I suppose so, yes."

"So…if you spoke casually, what would happen?"

Mahiru essentially never spoke in a casual tone. While she occasionally used words like 'dummy' or showed a hint of exasperation with 'geez', the language she used was always respectful and polite.

Even when addressing people, Mahiru primarily appended 'san,' to their name, and though she did add 'kun' for Amane, there was never any dropping of honorifics. Simply listening to her words, one might assume that she was talking to a stranger. Though her tone of voice conveyed something more intimate, the formality remained.

"S-Speak casually?"

"Yep. I mean, uh…you even talk to me—your boyfriend—in a formal way too. I realized that I've never actually heard you without your formalities."

"E-Even if you ask me that…"

As Amane kept his gaze fixed on Mahiru, she seemed to shrink uncomfortably within his arms.

"My bad, my bad. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I was just a bit curious, nothing more. You're always so formal, so I couldn't help but be curious."

"G-Geez…dummy."

Mahiru lightly headbutted Amane's chest a few times, partially to hide her embarrassment and partially to get back at him. After devoting a moment to 'punishing' him, she looked up at him, her eyes wavering with a sense of hesitation. Amane, feeling that he shouldn't push her too hard, gently patted her back, upon which Mahiru slowly began to speak.

"Hey, I…love you lots and lots, Amane-kun."

Whispered softly, just a single sentence.

A statement so short it couldn't have lasted for any longer than five seconds.

Yet, for a few moments, Amane's thoughts went completely blank, requiring an inordinate amount of time to digest Mahiru's words.

With her still in his arms, he froze in place. Mahiru's words looped again and again inside his mind as tried to fully grasp their meaning. When he finally managed to process what she'd said, he looked down at her, who was moving as awkwardly as a machine running out of oil in his arms.

Mahiru, for her part, appeared to have overheated as well—her face was flushed a deep crimson, and she had stopped moving.

Only the wetness in Mahiru's eyes shimmered, reflecting the light as they quivered. Those eyes, locked with Amane's, were instantly filled with shyness as if wanting to hide behind the curtain of her eyelids.

Amane watched her long eyelashes tremble as they began to lower like a curtain before sealing her cherry-colored lips that seemed about to close themselves off in the same way with his own.

Though Mahiru started moving again, it wasn't in resistance. Mahiru seemed to entrust herself to Amane entirely, leaning into him. It had been just a brief touch of the lips, yet when they parted, Mahiru looked up at him with cheeks even more flushed than before and eyes moistened anew.

The sight of her was once again, so deeply endearing.

"One more time," Amane said.

"…I can't."

"No, not the kiss. What you said earlier."

"I won't say it again!"

"Aww."

"*Baka*."

Realizing her limited repertoire of insults, Amane gently let go of Mahiru, who had thrown a word so adorable at him that calling it a cute telling-off wouldn't give it justice. Then, with her face still flushed, she moved away from him as if trying to cool off her warmth. The whole situation was somehow amusing, and Amane couldn't help but laugh.

"I love you too, Mahiru. Deeply, with all my heart."

"…I would prefer you to *not* start dialing up your formalities, Amane-kun."

"*Okaay.*"

Seeing her slightly nuanced gaze directed at him, he promptly apologized.

Without saying anything more, Mahiru proceeded to drink her now-lukewarm tea, as if continuing her cooling-down process.

Feeling it would be unfair to tease Mahiru any further, Amane simply watched her while taking a sip of his own coffee that had been sitting idle. Though the coffee had gone cold and was supposed to be black, it tasted strangely sweet to him.

"…Speaking of, we haven't changed the way we call each other even after we started dating, have we?"

Collecting his thoughts and reflecting on their relationship, Amane couldn't help but find it amusing that they still used the same honorifics as before. Mahiru, who seemed to have regained her composure, let out a tiny, adorable "Uuu," clearly concerned about the issue.

"B-But, Amane-kun is Amane-kun…" Mahiru responded.

"Well, it is hard to imagine you calling me by my name without any honorifics anyways. You've always used '-kun' or '-san' with people."

"I would find it challenging to address you without honorifics out of the blue."

"Well, sure, but…uh, I was just wondering, will it always be 'Amane-kun'?"

It wasn't that Amane disliked being called 'Amane-kun,' and he understood that it was Mahiru's own special way of addressing him. However, he couldn't help but wonder if it would remain that way indefinitely.

Although he hadn't explicitly told Mahiru, Amane was already prepared to spend the rest of his life with her. He had no intention of letting her go as long as she welcomed him and didn't want to separate unless she disliked the idea.

Will she continue to call me 'Amane-kun' in the future too? Amane couldn't help but wonder as a strange feeling filled him.

Mahiru looked up at him intently. "*...Amane?*" She tilted her head slightly as she called out his name, causing Amane to bite the inside of his cheek.
"…Somehow, addressing you without the honorific doesn't exactly feel right," she continued. "Or rather, it feels vastly different from usual."

"I-I see."

"It's also…embarrassing."

I'm *the one who's supposed to be embarrassed, having been called that so suddenly*, Amane reasoned inwardly. Still, he managed to hold back his words and neutralize the sweetness in his mouth with a gulp of his coffee. After

observing Amane's demeanor for a moment, Mahiru delicately grasped the hem of his shirt.

What's she up to? He looked at her and wondered, faced with her endearing gesture. She peeked at his face and looked up at him, her cheeks tinged with a blush.

"*Amane-san.*"

Her softly spoken words almost made Amane drop the mug full of coffee that he was holding.

Mahiru, as she currently was before Amane, was essentially cuteness given human form. But at the same time, she also exhibited a mature beauty. Her face, subtly flushed yet transforming that into a form of allure, carried a seductive quality. She whispered a voice so sweet that it seemed to seep from the edge of one's thoughts, immersing and melting into them—it was impossible *not* to be shaken.

Although she was visibly embarrassed, she mumbled, "This feels more natural, wouldn't you say? Hehe," making it clear that she hadn't said that intending to be alluring. But the fact that it wasn't intentional somehow made it even more potent, and that was all but blatantly obvious.

"…It's also terrible for my heart," Amane voiced.

"Wh-Why is that?" stammered Mahiru.

"Y-You know, well…uh, it's just…"

"Yes?"

"…If felt, really, um, wife-like, I guess."

It was embarrassing to even say it, but he had no choice but to spit it out. Judging by her frozen expression, it seemed Mahiru hadn't expected him to say what he did and began to scrutinize the meaning behind his words. The next moment, her face turned beet red, and she proceeded to give Amane's upper arm a few light slaps.

"…Please don't get any weird thoughts in your head," Mahiru urged.

"Yeah, sorry."

Amane was aware that he had indeed said something quite audacious and promptly apologized. Mahiru responded with an even softer "Seriously, geez." and a few more light slaps, but then her demeanor changed as if pondering something. For a moment, Amane wondered if she was displeased, but then he caught sight of a somewhat mischievous, teasing smile on her face. Realizing he

had inadvertently provided her with the perfect ammunition for amusement, he sighed internally.

"……I see, so '-*san*' gets your heart pounding faster than '*Amane-kun*,' does it?"

"I'll get used to it if you keep repeating it, you know."

"*Hmph*."

Amane anticipated that she was about to deliver another bombshell and decided to offer her a preemptive warning. Unsurprisingly, Mahiru, who seemed to have been plotting something, made no attempt to hide her discontent and slightly pursed her lips.

"…Giving you a surprise would be quite a delight now and again," she then added.

“Uh, Mahiru-san?”

“It’s nothing.”

Considering how unfazed she looked, Amane thought about pinching her cheeks to get back at her. But upon catching his gaze, Mahiru lowered her eyes. Her closed eyelids trembled slightly.

“That’s why…for now, I am okay with calling you Amane-kun.”

It seemed Mahiru managed to grasp what lay beyond Amane’s thoughts. Understanding the weight of the words ‘for now,’ she seemed willing to let things stay as they were for the time being. Amane gently placed his outstretched hand on her cheek, responded with a soft “Yeah,” and smiled warmly at Mahiru, whose ears had turned a deep shade of red.

Their Little Secret

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Mahiru sat alone in the bathtub, her knees drawn close to her chest. Alone with her thoughts, she fought desperately to resist the urge to scream, overwhelmed by the vivid scenarios playing out in her mind about what was soon to happen.

Even though I proposed the idea myself, I'm like this.

"...Tonight, is it okay if I don't go home...?" After mustering up her courage, Mahiru had uttered these words on the final night of the cultural festival. Amane, despite his significant hesitation, agreed to her request nonetheless.

Unlike their time at Amane's family home, she had made up her mind to spend the night together as *lovers*—a sentiment Amane appeared to grasp. In the early days of their relationship, he would have adamantly declined, his face flushing red with embarrassment. Now, however, he accepted her request, albeit with great reluctance. This showed that his feelings for Mahiru had deepened to a point where he could no longer turn a blind eye to his love and desire for her.

While Mahiru knew that she wasn't exactly well-versed about such matters, being more on the ignorant side for a girl of her age, by no means was she completely clueless. She understood the desires that a man like Amane could have and how desperately he tried to suppress them, accepting it as a matter of course. He pushed his urges to the wayside out of his love for her, but he was holding on by a thread. Mahiru was aware that the possibility of intimacy would skyrocket once they decided to spend the night together. She was aware that, should something happen to snap that thread, she would soon become dessert. Still, that possibility was one she was prepared for, and thus, she pleaded to spend time with Amane.

...It's not as if I want to go on the offensive or anything.

Just remembering what she had said made her so embarrassed that she

submerged her mouth in the bath and bubbled out her shame with her breath. Yet, as the realization of her outrageous statement and the current situation gradually sunk in, her embarrassment only grew further.

Mahiru had stayed in the bath to take care of her body after Amane got out first. It was just her usual routine, but from Amane's perspective, it might seem like she was putting in extra effort. While it may sound like an unnecessary excuse, she hadn't asked to stay over because she wanted to engage in love-making activities. She wanted to be by his side and feel his warmth, to make up for the lack of Amanium she felt during the cultural festival. She wasn't necessarily seeking out that specific act. Understanding that there was a high chance of being loved both physically and emotionally as a result of their intimacy, she was willing to accept things as they came.

"…Uuu," she groaned, her voice muffled and echoing in the bathroom. Despite her resolve, the embarrassment rising inside her was uncontrollable. Mahiru was just like any other girl her age. It wasn't as if she never had such fantasies of her own. She guessed why Amane sometimes uncomfortably moved away during moments of close contact. When that happened, she would occasionally notice the presence of a certain *something*. Due to this, or perhaps thanks to it, she faintly imagined Amane proving his love for her physically.

Mahiru's knowledge didn't extend to information about that *something*. Her understanding was limited to health textbooks and shoujo manga borrowed from her friend Chitose. While she understood the mechanics of sexual intercourse, she failed to visualize it in her mind. Her scarce knowledge led her to imagine only being touched, hugging naked, or wrapped in sheets. Even so, for Mahiru, it was quite stimulating, enough to overload her mind. The thought that something even more intense could happen to her made her heart race uncontrollably.

She instinctively held her chest. Beyond the soft plumpness, she felt a mighty pulse coming from her heart. She was aware that the strain on her heart was half due to tension and half due to anticipation, her embarrassment still burning within.

...I do want to respond to him. I do*, but…*

She understood very well that Amane was extremely reserved and cautious, respecting her to the point of not making a move. His hidden desires were not just physical urges but stemmed from his genuine love for her. That's why

Mahiru wanted to respond to him, to entrust herself to him completely, to be loved in body and soul, to become Amane's. Still, even then, she couldn't say for certain that she had no resistance to it at all.

...Oh, right, I must leave the bath soon. I know that Amane-kun might feel awkward otherwise.

While Mahiru agonized and squirmed about in the bath, Amane would be waiting in the living room. She didn't want to keep him waiting. Her heart still unsettled, she convinced herself to let things happen as they would and stepped out of the bathtub.

Whatever happens, happens.

After letting the droplets clinging to her body be gently absorbed by the towel, Mahiru applied body milk to her skin and proceeded with her facial skincare routine. She had to be careful not to be too enthusiastic in her preparations, so as not to make it obvious, but she couldn't help but be thorough in checking her body. While confirming the super soft, glossy texture of her skin after the bath, she glanced at the change of clothes in the basket. She had brought two types of nightwear.

One was a knee-length negligee with a lace cardigan, chosen with the anticipation of Amane's preferences. The negligee left her décolletage exposed, but the fabric was not see-through and nicely accentuated her body line—not too much, not too little. The cardigan, worn over it, moderated the level of exposure. It was evident from Amane's usual demeanor that he preferred such clothing, favoring modest attire that maintained a sense of elegance over those that blatantly emphasized sexuality. In other words, he liked things that were tidy and chaste.

Considering that, I should probably seal this *one away.*

She glanced briefly at the other set she'd prepared, hidden underneath as if to conceal it, and fabricated excuses in her mind. She had—just in case—prepared something for when one thing led to another. It truly was *just in case*. Mahiru had bought it encouraged by Chitose's insistence that *"it wouldn't hurt to have one just in case he initiated things."* The other negligee—or rather, *lingerie*—was incomparably more sensual than the first. It was something Mahiru would never wear in her right mind. The fabric, being sheer, was transparent and its design would easily reveal what should be hidden with a slight shift. It seemed far too unreliable.

In her mind, appearing in front of Amane wearing that would be coming on too strong—it would scream eagerness and likely repel him. Besides, wearing such an embarrassing garment was unthinkable. While it had been Chitose's idea, and Mahiru still felt foolish for even buying it, she feared the part of herself that might actually wear it to please Amane.

L-Let's go with the cardigan today…

The fact that I even purchased something like this…does that not make me incredibly naughty? Steering away from that line of thought, she reached for the

more modest negligee.

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In the end, choosing the regular negligee was probably the right decision. Amane had been watching TV on the sofa as usual, but when Mahiru approached and he looked up, his cheeks were too flushed to be excused simply as being post-bath warmth. Catching sight of Mahiru, he visibly relaxed, likely relieved that she hadn't been influenced by any of Chitose's ideas.

She did *encourage me, however.*

Mahiru was glad she hadn't worn that other outfit. Had she done so, Amane surely wouldn't have been able to look her in the eye. She didn't even have the confidence to appear in front of him dressed like that. His gaze, a mixture of relief and slight excitement, wasn't unpleasant to her, but it still felt awkward to be seen in her nightwear in such a bright place. She had been seen in her pajamas at Amane's family home, but those were just her regular clothes with intentionally minimal exposure. That had certainly been embarrassing in its own way, but this attire was on a whole different level.

Feeling Amane's gaze tracing the contours of her negligee, she shrunk a bit, but didn't hide away, considering she had worn it for him to see.

"D-Does it look strange?" she asked, even though she knew from his reaction that it wasn't the case.

Misinterpreting that as anxiety, Amane gently shook his head and said, "Not one bit. It's cute and suits you rather well. I was just thinking that they're different from the ones you wore back at my parents' house." Saying that, he continued observing her, albeit modestly.

"O-Of course I wouldn't wear such clothes at your parents' house. But, erm, only you can see me right now, Amane-kun, so I…kind of tried a bit harder."

To say that she had worn it for Amane wouldn't be entirely correct. She did acknowledge that part of her wanted to please him, to stir his feelings with such an outfit. The thought itself made her fidget embarrassingly, but Amane averted his eyes shyly at her words.

They were both aware of their mutual embarrassment, but nothing would progress at this rate, so Mahiru hesitantly moved closer to sit down next to him.

While Amane appeared somewhat tense, she wanted to be closer to him, to touch him, so she cautiously leaned against his body.

Under normal circumstances, this distance would have felt more natural, but the mix of uncertainty and anticipation regarding what might happen next rendered them both tense. Amane, clearly rigid, appeared to be making an effort to behave normally, accepting Mahiru's closeness without pulling away, which brought her a sense of reassurance.

"…Honestly, I was worried about what I'd do if you came in wearing some really daring nightwear."

His sudden confession sent an involuntary shiver through her body. Naturally, it was an unavoidable reaction.

"I had considered it, actually." She hadn't just *considered* it—she had actually purchased one and brought it with her. Of course, admitting that was something she found herself unable to do.

"Mahiru…"

"But, erm… I-I thought that if I was too…aggressive in what I wore, it might weird you out."

While she had refrained due to aforementioned reasons, Mahiru pondered whether Amane might have been hoping for her to wear something more provocative. Yet, she felt too embarrassed to don such a flashy and suggestive outfit on what could be their first time together. She murmured, "I'm *sure* of it," while recalling the negligee—no, lingerie—still no, the *thing* that barely kept anything hidden which she had stashed away under her change of clothes.

Amane, imagining what she might have been referring to, blushed deeper. "…I wouldn't be weirded out by that. I'd be happy knowing you wore it just for me, Mahiru."

"I-I won't wear it, okay?"

"You won't?"

"Would you like me to?" Hearing a hint of disappointment in his voice, she felt compelled to ask.

...I think it might be too stimulating for Amane-kun.

Beyond just the minimal amount of fabric, what was most striking was its design, which seemed to intentionally display areas that are usually covered up. It was the kind of item that could make someone faint the moment they laid eyes on it. Amane might be imagining something sheer and frilly, and while

Mahiru also considered such items to be risqué, what she had brought was even more daring—it was specifically designed to easily expose the skin if one chose to. It was likely even more radical than what Amane was imagining.

"No, well, someday…I would like to see it. When you feel like the time is right, Mahiru, go ahead and show it to me," he replied.

"Then…someday, okay?"

"Yeah, someday… We don't need to rush things for now."

While relieved that Amane had a desire to see it yet backed off so easily, Mahiru also felt conflicted. She appreciated his attitude of respecting her wishes, but couldn't help but send him a look questioning whether that was really okay for a gentleman. When he tilted his head in response, she simply replied, "It's nothing."

Amane then smiled gently, taking Mahiru's hand into his large palm. Despite knowing this was his way of calming her, given the situation, she still momentarily tensed up. However, the soft warmth soon melted her stiffness. His gesture was a silent message telling her not to worry about it too much, warming her heart and bringing a soft smile to her lips.

Her heart continued to race, but it was no longer painful. It was a gentle sensation that, while slightly constricting, led to a mix of wistful sweetness and happiness. Strangely, despite having a clear state of mind, there was a feeling contradicting that. She was lost in euphoria, her mind beginning to melt. But more than anything, she deeply felt Amane's care for her, and with those happy feelings, she leaned her head against him.

Her gaze rested on the television, which continued to deliver news in a monotone voice. The screen displayed a clear and distinct presentation of current events happening around them. Yet, none of it truly sank in, likely due to the presence beside her. Ever so gently, Amane also shifted closer to Mahiru, not so much leaning as it was a subtle, almost affectionate snuggle. They listened to the news anchor's steady voice, spending the time quietly.

Their once restless hearts found a calming rhythm, comfortably lulling each other into a soothing state. Feeling her heartbeat return to a familiar pace, Mahiru was reassured by Amane's body heat and the touch of his fingers. Then, she noticed a subtle change in the way his fingers had been touching her. What was once a comforting, enveloping touch, now subtly shifted into something different. He wasn't just containing her hand in his—his fingers slid between

hers as if seeking her, capturing her hand. This gesture seemed less about not letting go and more about not wanting to be apart. Mahiru silently squeezed his hand back in response.

"…It's about time. Let's get some sleep."

Moved by the gentle tone of his softly spoken words, Mahiru quietly gripped Amane's hand once more.

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Without being urged nor led by Amane, Mahiru held his hand and entered his bedroom, guided by her own will. Despite her resolve, she could only feel a rising tension and embarrassment, so to distract herself, she looked around his room, which she normally didn't scrutinize too much.

Since getting to know Mahiru, Amane had made it a point to clean properly. Perhaps due to the lack of many belongings, the room was remarkably tidy and neat. His personality seemed to reflect in the minimalistic décor. The only notable items were a plushie placed on his study/work desk and something that had caught Mahiru's attention back in spring: an 'evil' cushion so incredibly comfortable that it spoiled whoever sat on it. The plushie was a trophy of effort, won by Mahiru after multiple attempts during their Golden Week date. Amidst the room's simple ambiance, the plushie stood out charmingly—it was impeccably clean and carefully maintained.

"…I notice you have been taking great care of your plushie."

"Yeah, just enough that it doesn't get dusty, though. I don't sleep with it wrapped in my arms like you do, Mahiru."

"A-Are you making fun of me?"

He was likely referring to the teddy bear that he'd gifted for her birthday. Indeed, she slept soundly hugging it every night and took great care of it, but having that fact pointed out like this was embarrassing. It felt as if she was being childish despite being a highschool girl.

"Why would I? It's too cute to make fun of you. I'm happy that you're cherishing it." Having been replied to so seriously, Mahiru found herself unable to object.

"…I always treasure what I receive from you, Amane-kun."

“Thanks…you didn’t bring it with you today, did you? Kuma-san, I mean.”

“Erm, that’s because…I have you with me tonight, Amane-kun.”

“…Yeah.”

Today, her usual sleeping companion, her teddy bear, was left to hold down the fort. For tonight, Amane would take on that role. Whether Mahiru wanted to use him as a body pillow or to become a body pillow remained uncertain, but either way, they had every intention to caress each other, to share their warmth with each other.

Her chest beginning to ache slightly upon realizing she was actually in Amane’s room, she shrank a little. Then, for some reason, he silently covered the cat plushie with a blanket. Mahiru knew where the blanket came from as it had been draped over a chair, but his action left her puzzled, and her nervousness momentarily dissipated.

“…Is something wrong?”

“W-Well, I feel like I can’t relax right while it’s watching me… That’s all.”

Mahiru giggled. “So you care about it too, don’t you, Amane-kun?”

“Quiet, you.”

“I find it to be rather cute, though?”

“You’re one to talk, always hugging Kuma-san to sleep.”

“We already finished talking about that earlier, geez!”

Perhaps amused by Mahiru’s pouting expression, Amane chuckled. In response, she lightly slapped his side with her free hand, but he didn’t seem perturbed. Instead, he looked at her with amusement and affection, making her feel ticklish under his warm gaze. Being seen through like this was the most embarrassing part for Mahiru. It was yet another way he fawned over her.

Amane appeared ready to take whatever she threw at him. A little frustrated, Mahiru narrowed her eyes and looked at Amane, who, unfazed by her glare, wore a gentle smile on his lips. Then, he softly intercepted Mahiru’s small fist, her means of ‘attack,’ capturing it with his large palm. There was no strength in his hold. There was simply the intertwining of fingers, as if joining hands. Just this simple gesture drained Mahiru of all her strength. Now resigned to her fate, she was naturally led to the bed by Amane. Though she did not resist, sitting on the bed made her heart race all the more, as she thought about what was soon to come.

...What would you *like to do, Amane-kun?* She looked up, feeling him let go

of her hand, only to find herself embraced in Amane's arms before she could fully glimpse his face.

"…Is it okay if we, uh…pick up where we left off earlier…in the bathroom?"

Raising her head from his chest and looking up, Mahiru found herself gazing into Amane's deep, obsidian-like eyes. Although they appeared calm, there was a tinge of urgency colored in them, almost as if he was impatient. Nearly mesmerized by his gaze, she managed a faltering "Y-Yes," while her thoughts raced with panic. Her somewhat flustered reply was a reaction to the unexpected shift in his demeanor.

Amane, whether aware or unaware of her inner turmoil, smiled softly. The warmth in his smile gave Mahiru a spell of dizziness, and at that very moment, his rugged fingertips lifted her chin, and he leaned in to kiss her.

Ah... She was given no time to react.

His lips, slightly firmer than her own, touched hers gently. He seemed to have been taking care of his lips recently too, as they were full and smooth—not at all dry or chapped. They managed to soothe Mahiru's with a comforting caress. The warmth she felt transfer from him was much more intense than her own. Amane, understanding that Mahiru was just getting used to being kissed, pressed his lips to hers gently, rubbing them together slowly to ease her tension. She felt an emotion that wasn't exactly embarrassment but carried an indescribable restlessness, devoid of any trace of discomfort. The longer they kissed, the more her strength ebbed away, as if being drawn out of her, causing her to lean more and more against Amane's body. She might have suddenly fallen backward had he not been supporting her.

The slight roughness of his lips as he kissed her was tantalizing in an indescribable way, and she giggled unintentionally. Amane, who had initiated the kiss, also chuckled at her reaction. Then, gently and tenderly, he deepened the kiss, savoring Mahiru. His warm, slightly rough tongue slipped inside, cautiously yet eagerly exploring what resided within. Though she had some experience, this kind of kiss was one she was not yet accustomed to. Still, she wanted to accept Amane's warmth and found everything he did so comfortable that Mahiru, in turn, began to seek him out more and more as if responding to his advances. Their warmth melded through their lips, realizing even their breaths had become equally heated. Intertwining their breaths and tongues, they

continued to indulge endlessly in each other's warmth.

While her mind was in the clouds, her body was acutely sensitive to every stimulus. The mere caress of Amane's hand on her back, meant to support her, sent unknown sensations coursing through her body like electricity. Had Amane gotten used to doing this? Or had he been holding back until now? To Mahiru, the answer was unclear. As their kisses grew more intense, so did her responses—not just breaths but also soft moans began to spill from her lips. High-pitched. Slightly hoarse. Something between a voice and a breath. Mahiru herself couldn't fathom where such sounds were coming from. Her voice wasn't the only thing that seemed to melt; her entire body felt as if it was dissolving, wholly yielding to Amane.

As Mahiru responded to the kiss with a voice so sweet she could hardly believe it was her own, Amane gently moved his hand. Tracing the line of her waist hidden beneath the negligee made her body shiver for a moment, but she had no intention of stopping him. The feeling of his palm slowly sliding upwards sent shivers up her spine, but as they kissed, it was swiftly overlaid by a different sensation.

——If things continue like this, we…

If she let Amane have his way, she didn't even have to think about it—the destination they would be heading toward was clear as day. She had no intention of refusing. But reflexively, her body shook violently, and he quickly withdrew his hand from her body. Not only that, his lips also parted from hers as he wore an expression tinged with both lust and guilt. Seeing this, Mahiru instinctively buried her face in Amane's chest, capturing the hand that was always trying to prioritize her over himself.

"…Erm, I do not intend to retract what I said before…when I asked to stay the night," Mahiru cleared up, as Amane must have mistaken her shiver as fear or rejection.

No, that's not it.

To say she wasn't scared at all would be a lie. Letting someone touch her for the first time, experiencing unknown sensations, accepting another's desires…these were things that would naturally frighten most people on the receiving end. And rightly so. Entrusting one's body to another is to make oneself vulnerable to anything that might happen. Nevertheless, Mahiru had decided to accept Amane. Looking up at him from within his arms, she saw

surprise mingled with his earlier expression. In the end, he had been about to withdraw on his own. No matter how aroused he was, how much he desired Mahiru, he respected her and was willing to wait until she was ready.

How could she possibly refuse Amane, who was endlessly kind and incapable of putting himself first? His warmth, his heart, his appearance, his *everything*. She wanted to accept him in his entirety and make him hers. She wanted him to understand that the desire to possess the other wasn't his alone. Amid her shyness, yet with unwavering resolve, she gazed at Amane through eyes slightly moistened by the intensity of their kiss. He ushered a sigh, causing her body to tremble in worry that she had angered him. But then he ruffled her hair, took several deep breaths as if to compose himself, and looked back at her. In his obsidian eyes, a fire burned too fiercely to mask, mixed with a cool, iron-like glint.

"Um, well I…"

"Y-Yes?"

"As for how I feel, I want to make you mine, Mahiru."

"…Yes."

That must be how he truly felt. While it felt unseemly, shifting her gaze slightly downward revealed something that spoke more eloquently than words.

"…But, you know, erm…I'm not old enough to take responsibility just yet, and if something happened, you would be the one affected the most. Well, I would of course take responsibility if something *did* happen, but it's not like I can promise a legally definite relationship immediately." Mahiru wasn't so obtuse or foolish as to not understand his words. "I love you, Mahiru, and that's precisely why I want to put you first. Once you find things that you want to do or study in the future, I don't want to interfere with those goals. We will spend a lot of time together from now on, and considering that, I don't think that your life should be dictated by the emotions and desires of a single moment right now."

"…I understand."

"I am fully prepared to spend the rest of my life with you, Mahiru. It's just that, I…"

"You don't need to say anything else," Mahiru cut in.

She understood even without him continuing.

Honestly, he's always so…

Amane always acted with her best interests at heart, in every way. Still, Mahiru wasn't oblivious to it all either. She knew that the act love led to could result in a new life, and no contraception was truly foolproof. Even with utmost care, there was always a chance of conception, and should it happen, Mahiru would be nurturing a life while still a student. This could lead to some form of punishment from the school, or even if not, she might be the subject of criticism for being so irresponsible. Moreover, it wasn't a done deal once the child was born—it still had to be raised. The idea of bringing another child like Mahiru into the world, and being the ones at fault for it, was something she absolutely wanted no part of.

Truly, I am such a lucky woman.

Amane had taken everything into consideration, and despite being faced with the opportunity and temptation to unleash his long-suppressed desires, he still decided to choose her future. Ever so grateful for his decision, Mahiru gently reached her hand out to his cheek.

"Amane-kun, I understand just how much you respect me, and that you love me very deeply. To be valued this much by you…I'm so, so happy."

Her chest stirred with warmth.

Feeling so deeply loved, respected, and cherished, Mahiru realized the extent of his feelings. Although she had been filled with happiness since they started dating, there had always been a small, unfillable gap inside her heart. Now, at last, Amane's presence had completely filled that empty space. Her heart, once hollow, was now wholly filled by Amane. She felt this immense happiness with her heart and body, so much so that she felt like she might cry tears of joy. Not trying to contain this surge of happiness, Mahiru let all her emotions flow into a smile and pressed her lips against Amane's in a tender kiss.

"…I love you, Amane-kun…from the bottom of my heart!"

Mahiru was confident that at this moment, she was the happiest and most fulfilled person in the world. As she felt so overwhelmed with emotion that she was on the verge of tears, Amane bestowed a gentle kiss upon her. His kiss, like a soft ray of sunlight illuminating both body and soul, was calm and soothing. He then tenderly enveloped Mahiru in his embrace.

"Could you please wait until I'm ready to take responsibility?"

Just what did that imply? Amane, his voice slightly trembling, was setting constraints on himself for their future together. The way he looked at her with a

love-filled gaze, imbued with slight impatience and a trace of frustration, made it easy for Mahiru to guess how much he was holding back. The biggest proof of that was felt in their close contact. The very embodiment of his restrained impulses was almost pressed up against her, as if to communicate his resolve.

Mahiru cast a brief glance downward and blushed as a certain something entered her field of vision. However, with Amane's resolve crystal clear, the sight was by no means unpleasant. With a bashful nod of acknowledgement to herself, Mahiru nestled closer toward the ever-enduring and steadfast Amane once more. As she touched his solid chest, she sensed his racing heartbeat, which made her own pulse quicken as if in a kind of sympathetic resonance.

"Then, I shall let myself be cherished until the time comes."

I'm so, so *happy.* Mahiru smiled at Amane with a satisfied look, and he nodded back at her with a satisfied expression of his own before softly bringing her into a gentle embrace.

"I'll make sure to cherish you."

Hearing his whisper, Mahiru closed her eyes, full with a sweet and gentle anticipation. They held each other in silence, their heartbeats merging into a synchronized rhythm. This calming sensation made her feel as if they were melting into one another.

"…Hey."

As Mahiru teetered on the brink of sleep, comforted by what felt like gentle sunlight, she faintly heard a voice calling out to her. "Yes?" she responded softly.

"Is it okay if I ask something embarrassing?"

Seeing Amane mumbling his words as if he found them difficult to say, Mahiru couldn't help but giggle, wondering why he was hesitating now of all times.

"Please go ahead. As the one that I love, I shall accept your cool side, your embarrassing side, and your every request."

Mahiru was ready to face anything and love everything about him.

...I wonder what this 'embarrassing' thing he wants to ask is. She tilted her head in her mind as she wondered, prepared to accept whatever it happened to be. Then, despite his clear hesitation, Amane moved his lips and brought them close to Mahiru's neck. Although she trembled slightly at the sudden contact, there was no pain, only the warmth of his breath. Mahiru then relaxed her

momentarily tensed body.

"…Well, um… May I touch you? …Just a little," Amane asked tentatively.

Mahiru blinked in surprise. His voice was quiet and raspy, but there was no mistaking the passion in his request. Amane seemed to have realized that she might have been reluctant to fully accept him with all of her body. Considering that, what his question really meant was… Her face immediately flushed a deep crimson upon realizing the implication of his words. Her embarrassment not yet fading, she peered up at him briefly, then lowered her gaze again. "…P-Please, be gentle with me."

Mahiru enjoyed being touched by Amane. Even though it might bring her sensations she had never experienced before, she had no intention of refusing his touch. So long as Amane was the one teaching her, she was sure it wouldn't lead to anything bad. Besides, they had made a promise—to experience their first time together. There was no way she would refuse the first time Amane would offer her.

That soft reply was all she could muster through her embarrassment, eliciting a delighted chuckle from Amane. Next, he pulled her by her hand, and collapsed onto the bed, hovering over her body. With the lamp illuminating his figure from behind, he gazed at Mahiru fervently. His look was tender, loving, yearning, and imploring. In the depths of his obsidian eyes, an undeniable, boiling heat flickered, and merely being under his gaze made her feel inexplicably hot to her core, like her body was engulfed in flames. Her heartbeat was significantly faster than usual, almost feeling as if it wasn't her own. His palms, always gentle and hesitant, now traced her body with a hesitant yet clear intent. Still, she was not afraid.

"…Um, if you don't like it, or if it hurts, please tell me. I'll stop right away," Amane declared.

Perhaps worried about the momentary shiver of tension in her body, Amane had gazed intently into Mahiru's eyes before touching her bare skin. He had made that declaration with utmost seriousness. The contrast between his earlier sexiness and his now earnest, considerate gaze was so stark that Mahiru couldn't help but notice it.

"…Don't you think that, as a woman, I'd be happier if you just did as you pleased?"

"Th-That might be true, yeah. But I don't want to force you into anything."

Touched by his words that showed constant concern for her, Mahiru quietly smiled and reached out to Amane. As she placed her hand on his flushed cheek, perhaps due to a mix of nervousness and excitement, the redness in his cheeks deepened and his eyes widened, as if fueled with more emotion.

"Everything you give and do to me, makes me happy… So, Amane-kun, please let me accept all of your feelings."

Even if it hurt a little, if it was something given to her by Amane, she was willing to accept it.

Amane would never deliberately make her suffer. She knew that if any pain occurred, it would be an unavoidable part of the process. This mindset was just one example of her mental preparation.

As Mahiru gazed at him firmly with a smile, Amane's mouth twitched awkwardly, as though he was struggling with something. Then, after swallowing what seemed to be his effort to endure, he placed his palm on Mahiru's chin, lifting it up. Though Mahiru had an inkling of what was to come, as her vision blurred like a curtain being drawn, she felt as if she could see Amane on the other side, tense yet unable to fully suppress a smile born of both restraint and inability to hold back.

"…To the best of my ability, I'll try to make it feel good for you too," he then said.

After a gentle kiss that was merely a touch, followed by his softly spoken words, Mahiru quietly lowered her hand that had been touching Amane. She was certain, both in body and soul, that she could entrust everything to Amane.

...It will all be okay.

With this person, now and for the rest of her life, that would hold true. Filled with a deep sense of relief and euphoria, Mahiru accepted the hand gently exploring a place she had never before allowed anyone to touch.

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When Mahiru awoke the next morning, she quickly realized where she was sleeping and instantly pressed her lips together. She did so to avoid startling Amane, who was sleeping soundly beside her, hugging her tightly. Barely suppressing a scream that almost escaped her tightened lips, Mahiru then switched to calming her racing heart, freshly exhausted from the morning's

commotion, and glanced up at her beloved, whose eyes were still closed.

The room was dim, partly due to the curtains being drawn, indicating it was still early morning and that the sun was just beginning to make its daily debut. The light from the side lamp, forgotten to be turned off, seemed unusually bright to the point of dazzling.

In the gentle light, Amane slept with a look of complete peace on his face. He appeared even more innocent and endearing than usual, radiating a sense of deep satisfaction, and just seeing him like this brought a smile to Mahiru's face. He held Mahiru in his embrace with an expression of absolute contentment, reminiscent of a child holding a teddy bear in their sleep. This childlike innocence sharply contrasted with the events of the previous night.

He's so cute, she thought. Yet, this image made her mind wander back to last night, and once again, Mahiru found herself pursing her lips tightly. *That…could have been dangerous.*

Of course, by that, she was referring to Amane's behavior last night. They had uncovered many facets of each other that were previously unknown, teaching one another in the process. As a result, Mahiru had acquired a deeper understanding of such activities, and had managed to discover new sides of Amane that she hadn't seen before. For example, he was far more skilled and perceptive than she had imagined, yet his caution during crucial moments still remained. But that wasn't all. She also realized that the extent of the desires he had consistently restrained was far greater than she had thought. Just recalling the events of the night—how his gaze, his fingers, and his lips had explored her with a blend of gentleness and thoroughness—caused her cheeks to redden once again.

Glancing under the sheets hiding her body, Mahiru lifted the fabric to see that the clothes she'd been wearing had returned to where they were originally. More accurately, they had been deliberately moved back to their rightful places. However, the delicate fabric now had wrinkles, and the new marks that weren't there before her stay, had been lovingly planted on her pristine skin. These marks were easily visible through the gaps in her negligee—both a clear testament to Amane's impulses and possessiveness and a vivid reminder of their intimacy the night before. While recognizing that fact again was embarrassing for Mahiru, she couldn't bring herself to blame him, as it signified just how much Amane desired her.

Honestly…

Letting out a warm sigh, Mahiru buried her face in Amane's chest, covering herself in his embrace. Until now, her touches had been over his clothes, so she

hadn't realized it, but she discovered yesterday his body was more toned and robust than it appeared. She felt it firsthand through their physical contact. The muscles she traced, surprisingly firm, added a strange allure to his sweaty, flushed skin, and were strikingly masculine, enough to stir her heart. That's why her current position was quite embarrassing, but the happiness it brought overshadowed that embarrassment, leading her to snuggle up close like this.

He was so…manly.

Though she had always known this, Amane's gentlemanly behavior had somewhat masked this fact. As a result, she was thoroughly taught, both physically and emotionally, that Amane had only been desperately concealing his true desires. Now, feeling the hand that was wrapped around her back, which had touched her without reserve, her body began to feel strangely hot.

With her thoughts returning to the present, Mahiru realized she was caught between overwhelming embarrassment that urged her to run away and a desire to stay wrapped in the arms of her beloved, savoring the blissful moments. If Amane had been awake, they might have cuddled for a while, enjoying their time together. However, he was unfortunately still sleeping soundly. Moreover, the light seeping through the curtain gaps was growing brighter, signaling that it was likely time to begin their morning routine.

Even on her day off, Mahiru didn't want to break her routine. Since their activities the previous night hadn't been *too* taxing on her body, she felt it was alright to start her day. After spending some time lost in thought, wrapped in the scent and warmth of the one she loved, Mahiru gently decided to slip out of Amane's relaxed hold.

After I get dressed, let's prepare breakfast, Mahiru decided. She certainly hadn't made that decision because being reminded of last night caused her to groan in embarrassment, nearly writhing on the bed. Absolutely not.

Mahiru carefully got out of bed, trying not to wake him. While attempting to smooth out the wrinkles that had formed in her negligee without damaging the fabric, she looked around the room for a clock. Then, spotting the mountain of blankets on the desk, she couldn't help but giggle for a moment.

Slipping into her slippers quietly, Mahiru approached the desk and freed the cat plushie that had been cozily ensnared in blankets all night. The plushie's round, innocent eyes seemed oblivious to the events of the night before.

Gently, Mahiru lifted the poor cat that had been deprived of its master's

presence all night. She placed it beside Amane, who was oblivious to it all as he remained sound asleep, breathing peacefully. Mahiru had done so to ensure that he wouldn't feel lonely or confused upon waking up to find her gone. The sight of him sleeping in tranquility next to the plushie was incredibly an endearing one.

Any remnants of the intense, sharp expression and the unconcealable heat in his gaze from last night were nowhere to be found. Now, he appeared simply as his usual self, yet, having known Amane from last night, he seemed even more youthful and dearer to her than before. Mahiru thought to herself that she would secretly take a photo later, something Amane would probably gently refuse if he heard. Kneeling by the bed, she lightly kissed the cheek of the still-sleeping Amane before standing up.

Let's prepare breakfast. Amane-kun's favorite—dashimaki tamago.

I wonder, is this how a wife feels, looking forward to her husband waking up? Mahiru then asked herself, a thought she deemed far too early and embarrassing to consider. A spring in her step, Mahiru exited his bedroom, making her way to the bathroom.

He Who Pays Close Attention

“(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs.”

This is the worst.

Mahiru muttered this thought in her mind, careful not to say it out loud. She had been feeling under the weather ever since she woke up, and by the time she arrived at school, she had realized that this bout of ill health was rather severe. Her head felt heavy, as if weighed down by stone bricks, and her thoughts were more sluggish than usual. Moving around only exacerbated the dull ache, as if being rammed by a blunt object, and occasionally, her lower abdomen would spike with pain as if tens of needles were being continually jabbed into it. Moreover, her body felt feverishly warm, and a constant fatigue clung to her.

She had resigned herself to this phenomenon as an inevitable part of being born a woman, but the disruption to her hormonal balance was infuriating. Even though she felt slightly emotionally unstable, she was able to suppress it, soothing her frayed emotions with reason and letting out an occasional soft sigh.

For better or worse, Mahiru’s condition was relatively mild compared to the horror stories she had heard from other women. Providing she took medication, she could function without any major issues. But if her condition were any worse, a visit to the hospital would be unavoidable. Still, it wasn’t entirely unbearable for everyday life and remained within the realm of major discomfort. While she regretted her sex at times like these, Mahiru realized it wasn’t something she could choose.

After school, having taken medication and managing to keep her discomfort hidden, she returned straight home without any detours. She had been spending her time quietly and peacefully at Amane’s house, seeking mental solace…but after a while, when Amane returned home with shopping bags in hand, he looked at her intently.

“You came home early today,” he said.

“Yes. I’m sorry for leaving today’s groceries to you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Amane eased. “It just seemed like you came home early, judging by the looks of things, so I couldn’t help but wonder.”

Amane was right—today, she had hurried back home. Despite feeling physically unwell, she wanted to spend her time quietly, away from people. She had taken another dose of medicine before Amane’s return to ease her pain, but it wasn’t completely effective or fast-acting. A dull ache and lingering fatigue plagued her body, continuing to torment Mahiru from within.

“I thought it would be good to relax at home today,” Mahiru replied. Smiling as she brought a hand to her stomach to mask her abdominal pain, she noticed Amane staring intently at her once again. His gaze seemed to be searching, probing for something about her.

“Is there a problem?”

“Nope, it’s nothing,” he responded, seemingly lost in thought, then busied himself with storing the groceries in the fridge.

Relieved by this, Mahiru blankly observed Amane as he skillfully put the ingredients away, relaxing her posture as she sank into the couch. Once he’d finished and called out to her from over the counter, she straightened up her pose.

“I’ll boil some water. Fancy a drink?”

“Huh? Oh, yes please.” Mahiru nodded without much thought to his sudden proposal. Amane, seemingly unaware of her distracted state, looked at her with a gaze more tender than usual.

“Do you mind if I try making one for you myself?” he then asked.

“Oh, are you offering to treat me to one of your homemade drinks, Amane-kun?”

“I sure am. I’ll prepare it for you now, okay?”

Grateful for Amane’s offer to prepare a warm drink, Mahiru left everything to him without worry. In her view, even if he just served her hot water, that would be enough. She could simply cool it down and enjoy it slowly. Not in the mood to exert herself, she decided to fully entrust the task to Amane and leaned back on the sofa, listening absentmindedly to the escalating whistle of the boiling kettle. Before she knew it, Amane had returned to the living room.

He held a single cup in his hand.

Huh? As soon as that thought crossed her mind, Amane placed the cup in her hands, saying, “Here you go.” The cup, designed with a double-layer structure to prevent heat loss, was not hot to the touch. Inside, it contained a lightly yellow-tinted liquid. Some fibrous material seemed to be mixed in too, but since she hadn’t been paying close attention to what Amane was brewing, she couldn’t identify the contents.

As she tilted the cup slightly, the liquid, seemingly on the thick side, flowed ever so slightly. Perhaps it had been stirred earlier, as fibers within it twirled and danced like clothes tumbling in a washing machine, drawing spirals in a swirl.

“…What’s this?”

“It’s honey and ginger. Great for the body and it’ll help keep you warm,” Amane said as he gently placed a blanket that had been draped on a chair over Mahiru’s shoulders. He then placed a mysterious bag of sorts on her lap, rendering her utterly bewildered. The gentle warmth from the cup in her hand was comforting, and now the added heat and weight on her lap made her look up at Amane in confusion, who maintained a calm expression.

“Put it on your stomach,” he suggested.

Realizing the mysterious bag was actually a hot water bottle, Mahiru almost let out a voice. The weight and the sound it made when she slightly tilted it confirmed it was filled with hot water. When he said, *“I’ll boil some water,”* he must have been referring to the hot water bottle, rather than making a drink for himself, as she noticed no drink prepared for him in the kitchen. It seemed he had boiled the water solely for her drink and the hot water bottle.

Sitting slightly apart from her, Amane didn’t have a serious look on his face, but rather a flat expression with a tinge of concern. “Try to keep yourself comfortable. Would you prefer to lie down after you finish your drink?”

“I-I’m okay. It’s not that severe.”

“Then you should be fine like this for now, I suppose. Let me know if it gets too hard to bear.”

Realizing she had been completely seen through, Mahiru watched Amane casually reveal that he had noticed her feeling unwell, as he fiddled with the air conditioner remote to adjust the temperature.

“Um, h-how did you figure it out?” she asked.

“…You seemed a bit under the weather, and you had your hand on your stomach. When it happens regularly, you sort of start to notice the patterns, if

that makes sense."

Amane seemed somewhat apologetic as he awkwardly explained himself. It was Mahiru who felt sorry for making him worry after he had noticed something was amiss, but Amane appeared to be troubled by something else entirely.

"S-Sorry for grossing you out," Amane began apologizing.

"What makes you say that?" Mahiru asked in return.

"Well, uh, you know, it might make you uncomfortable if a man knows or tries to show consideration for that kind of stuff."

Mahiru understood where Amane was coming from. Some people didn't enjoy unwanted consideration or simply preferred for their issues to remain unnoticed. While she was quite surprised to learn that Amane had noticed, she didn't feel any disgust, and could instead see how he had figured it out. She had been spending a considerable amount of time with him—especially after she had fallen for him—often staying at his place after school. It would be no exaggeration to say she was almost always at Amane's house, except for when bathing or sleeping.

Given the amount of time they had spent together, it wasn't strange that Amane had noticed her regular discomforts. While Mahiru could sympathize with his concerns about possibly being intrusive, more than that, she was reassured knowing that Amane was paying attention to her.

"…I wouldn't be happy if a stranger found out, but we've spent a lot of time together, Amane-kun. I don't mind if it's you. Besides, it's my fault for accidentally showing it on my face."

"Oh, so you were trying not to let it show."

"This pain is a monthly affair—there's no avoiding it, really. It would only attract worry if I let it show on my face."

She had accepted that her regular bouts of ill health were inevitable and nothing could be done about it. She was used to the pain, so she tried not to let it show in her expressions or gestures when others were around. However, it seemed like all her efforts were in vain since Amane had managed to see through her anyway.

While she didn't want to worry him, her feelings were mixed—also being happy that he was concerned and cared for her. Looking at Amane next to her, who was staring at her with a serious expression, she felt this contradiction of

emotions.

"Taking care of someone unwell is the natural thing to do," Amane responded. "My mom had it pretty bad herself, so I've heard plenty of things about it… It's obvious that I'd do whatever I can to help."

Amane's naturally caring nature and excellent upbringing his parents provided shone through in moments like these. Over the past half-year or so, this had become increasingly apparent to Mahiru. Despite occasionally speaking bluntly, Amane was honest, adaptable, and keenly aware of those around him. He had a knack for offering help in a way that didn't come off as a favor. His regard for others came as naturally as breathing, and he always cared for and valued Mahiru in the same way.

His lack of self-confidence and lack of regard to his own needs were his flaws, but these were more than compensated for by his strengths. These flaws had improved recently, and Mahiru felt compelled to support him wherever he fell short. To her, Amane was a wonderful person.

"That's just like you, Amane-kun."

"It's just the normal thing to do… If I were sick, wouldn't you also make sure I rested in bed?"

"Well, maybe…"

"See?" Amane declared, puffing out his chest with utmost confidence, eliciting a laugh from Mahiru. However, a sudden pang in her abdomen caused her to tense up briefly. Amane caught this subtle change, and his eyes instantly reflected a mix of concern and sadness.

"Um, if it really feels horrible, maybe it's best for you to go home and rest quietly. But, well, it really depends on how you're feeling… Some people find others to be a nuisance when they're sick, and some feel vulnerable. That's why it's probably best for you to decide whether you want to stay here or go back home," Amane explained, his words coming out in a mumbled, perplexed tone.

Mahiru placed a hand over her mouth, giggling at his response. She found herself at a loss with him, always so thoughtful, and tenderly offering suggestions with her best interests at heart.

"…At the moment, I want to stay together," she said, feeling that now, she could genuinely rely on his presence.

Originally, she should have quickly left to avoid being a bother. If this had happened when they had just started interacting, she would have most certainly

found an excuse to go home. However, now, Mahiru felt comfortable enough to depend on Amane. Once again, Mahiru keenly felt how he had touched a tender part inside her, bringing a comforting warmth that, oddly, made her heart flutter.

"…I wouldn't say it's unbearable. It's just uncomfortable when I move."

"Gotcha. I'll take care of dinner today, then."

"…You will, Amane-kun?"

"Just leave it to me. Thanks to having an exceptional teacher, I've learned to make a few dishes myself."

"Hehe, don't forget that this teacher has an exceptional student, too."

"It's all in the way you teach, Mahiru. You're really good at it," Amane insisted. Though in truth, it was largely due to his quick learning. At first, he struggled with cooking, often burning stir-fried vegetables or overcooking omelets. But once she showed him how and explained the theory behind each step, he quickly absorbed the lessons. Amane, being good at studies, likened cooking to chemistry, and his understanding of cooking procedures improved rapidly.

While his skills were still somewhat rough around the edges, he was now able to prepare a dish on his own and was honing his skills by helping every day. Therefore, Mahiru wasn't exactly worried about him cooking.

"Anything in particular you want to eat?"

"…I don't have a strong appetite, so something warm and light on the stomach would be great."

"Got it. I'll try to make something with what's in the fridge."

"You've come a long way," Mahiru noted.

"Even *I'm* able to learn a thing or two, you know."

"Hehe." Just having this light conversation seemed to alleviate her bodily fatigue. Amane's deliberate attempt to sound a bit more cheerful appeared to be an effort to distract her from her pain. Evidently, it appeared to work, as engaging in conversation made her feel more at ease.

"…Have you taken medicine?"

"I have, yes."

"Alright. Is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

Since he asked so kindly, Mahiru felt like she could keep on being spoiled forever, which made her hesitate a bit. But then Amane whispered to her like a tempting devil, "You can lean on me as much as you want," leading Mahiru to

let out a small groan and then sneak a glance at him.

"I do want to take a nap, yes. But, I…um, don't want to go home."

Using his bed wouldn't be the best idea, so she wanted to take a light nap on the sofa. Amane blinked, seemingly surprised. She expected him to object to the idea of her sleeping in his house—being a man and a woman—but, truth be told, she had dozed off at Amane's place several times before. Moreover, she trusted that he wouldn't do anything inappropriate to someone who was unwell.

Hesitant, Mahiru looked at him.

What if he refuses?

Instead, Amane showed a troubled yet amused smile, more out of embarrassment than disapproval. His large palm then softly moved to rest on her head.

"Sure thing. Just take your time and rest—I'll be right here."

"…Okay." Closing her eyes slowly, Mahiru leaned against Amane's arm that was beside her. She felt his body jerk suddenly, but she had no intention of moving away.

He did say he would stay by my side.

With that thought, Mahiru figured this much closeness was allowed. The warmth that spread gently from where they touched was comforting. Turning her face slightly toward Amane, she was greeted by his familiar, refreshing scent reminiscent of mint, mixed with the subtle fragrance of soap from his fabric softener. This soft, calming aroma made her cheeks relax, and Mahiru let go of her consciousness as she savored this blissful warmth.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

Awakening from a sweet dream, Mahiru slowly lifted her heavy eyelids, only to find her vision filled with gray. Her mind, slower than usual, gradually retraced what she had been doing before, realizing belatedly that she had taken a nap. Still in a sluggish state, she raised her head.

What's this?

An obsidian gleam came into her view, and a gentle whisper soon followed. "Morning."

Startled, Mahiru momentarily froze in place, unable to comprehend the

situation. Then, the owner of the voice, Amane, continued in a calm tone as if to rouse her, “Did you sleep well?”

“…Good…morning,” Mahiru finally managed to reply, her voice unintentionally rising in pitch as she recalled the crucial detail that she had fallen asleep leaning against Amane.

Indeed, it made sense that she had felt unusually warm and comfortable, having slept while feeling Amane’s body heat. Despite a slight physical stiffness, she felt surprisingly refreshed and satisfied mentally.

“Uhhh, let me just say this first. You did *this* while you were sleeping, and…it didn’t feel like the right thing to do, so I didn’t shake you off.”

“‘This’…?” Mahiru asked, tilting her head in confusion as she checked what Amane was referring to, and then buried her face again into his arm.

Somewhere along the line, she had firmly grasped Amane’s hand, intertwining their fingers as if refusing to let go, sliding her own between his rugged fingers. Confronted with the fact that she had not only leaned on him but also held his hand, Mahiru nearly groaned, barely managing to hold back.

Amane must have certainly been unable to move freely. In addition to the leaning, she had also perfectly robbed him of the freedom to move one of his hands. Amane must have been quite troubled by this.

“I-I’m sorry. I must have been a nuisance.”

“No, that wasn’t the case at all… Still, you must’ve been a bit uncomfortable trying to sleep like that. It’s too late saying it now, but sleeping while sitting down isn’t exactly ideal.”

“N-No, I was sleeping soundly!” Mahiru exclaimed, attempting to shake her hands in denial, only to realize they were still intertwined. She quickly relaxed her grip, and Amane, amused by her flustered reaction, gently disentangled their fingers with a careful movement, chuckling softly.

While suppressing a voice filled with a sense of loss, Mahiru knew she couldn’t lean on him forever. She repositioned herself to sit properly on the sofa and looked up at Amane, who had also adjusted himself in the same way. Amane seemed to notice that her condition had improved post-nap, and looked at her with relief in his eyes.

“Has the medicine kicked in yet?”

“Yes, it has. My body feels much better now. I’m sorry for the trouble.”

Like she had said, Mahiru believed that she had been quite the burden.

Firstly, she had made Amane worry, and secondly, her actions had essentially restricted his movements, likely leading to a rather boring time for him as he was fixed to the sofa. Additionally, by leaning on him, she had placed most of her weight on him, unnecessarily tiring him out.

While she felt quite apologetic, Amane showed the same old expression he always wore. As a matter of fact, he seemed not to understand why she was apologizing to begin with, blinking his black eyes a few times in confusion.

"Why? You didn't cause me any trouble at all. In fact, I'm happy to see you depending on me."

"…Please don't try to spoil me like that."

"Look who's talking. *You're* always the one trying to spoil *me*," Amane retorted. "Let me return the favor," he added while playfully poking her cheek, which caused her to squint from the ticklish sensation.

"That's *one* thing, and *this* is another," she replied playfully.

"Huh? Playing unfair now, are we?"

Mahiru chuckled in response. "I am a sly woman, after all."

Worried that her excessive concern might make him uneasy, Mahiru stood her ground, showing the kind and gentlemanly Amane her gratitude. He was visibly dissatisfied by this, making her giggle once more. Perhaps thanks to her light nap, laughter, or the effects of the medicine, her body now felt considerably lighter despite it being a bit stiff earlier.

Glancing at the clock, it seemed she had slept for just under an hour. By this time, they usually would have finished preparing dinner, making her realize she had inconvenienced Amane yet again. As she thought this, she tried to stand up, saying, "I need to prepare dinner…" However, she found herself unable to. It wasn't that her body felt heavy, but rather Amane was physically holding her down.

More precisely, he was gently but firmly holding her back by the hand, his soft yet insistent grip clearly conveying his intention not to let her stand.

"Just stay seated," he said.

"Huh? But I feel better now…"

"Even so. You still haven't completely recovered, have you? You still look a bit worse for wear. Also, I promised to cook, remember? Let me keep my promise."

Although Amane had said he would take care of things, Mahiru wanted to

argue that she had recovered enough to move around normally. However, one look into his eyes told her that he was not going to budge. This was something she had come to understand about him since they grew closer: while Amane generally yielded easily, once he set his mind on something, nothing could convince him not to follow through on it. Whenever this happened, trying to resist was meaningless—he wouldn't yield until she gave in. And because his stubbornness was usually for the sake of others, Mahiru found it hard to firmly reject his intentions.

Now it was Mahiru's turn to look displeased, sending him a reproachful glare. Amane, however, merely chuckled, his determined eyes showcasing his refusal to back down.

"Don't start sulking now… Stop always trying to sort things out on your own. Rely on me more."

"…Okay."

"Good. Now just sit back and relax—imagine you're on a boat waiting for your food," Amane joked. "…It might not match up to your luxury cruise ship feeling, but still."

"Geez." Mahiru couldn't help but laugh at his self-deprecating joke, which was clearly intentional on his part.

Amane smiled back and affectionately stroked her head. Knowing this gesture was meant to reassure her, Mahiru quietly accepted it with joy. She was certain this was something special Amane did only for her.

"…It might take me a while, so you can sleep a little longer if you'd like," he suggested.

"No, I'm okay like this. I shall keep an eye on your brave efforts from here."

"You worry too much." An amused smile on his face, Amane headed for the kitchen.

Mahiru watched him go, filled with a sense of happiness and reassurance. She hadn't said that out of worry. She was simply overwhelmed with joy and gratitude to see him putting in effort for her sake. She wanted to witness every moment of his caring actions, though he might not realize this himself.

Seeing Amane slip into his simple apron felt so incredibly endearing to her. Observing him as if he were family, indulging in her own self-serving and perhaps fanciful thoughts, Mahiru intently watched as Amane began to fumble with the ingredients.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

About an hour later, steaming dishes with a fragrant aroma were lined up in front of Mahiru. Despite the short distance from the sofa to the dining table, Amane escorted her with great care. Mahiru blinked frequently in awe at the meal he had prepared.

Expecting something like porridge based on her request for warm, light food, she was surprised to see that, while rice was indeed used, the dishes were that of a different culinary style.

What was served in a deep dish was a cream-colored risotto, its consistency hinting at its richness. From the aroma and appearance, it was likely a cream risotto. Not just rice, but mushrooms and spinach had been added, providing accents of tan and green.

"It's risotto made with soy milk. I tried making it with raw rice, by the way. I also used some mushrooms and spinach from the freezer, but was that alright?" Amane explained, showcasing his growth.

Taken aback by his explanation, Mahiru was momentarily frozen in surprise. Amane noticed this and added, "I did tell you I'd make it properly, you know." She hadn't doubted him in that regard, but she hadn't expected this kind of dish from his repertoire, leading to her temporary astonishment.

"Yes, using those ingredients was fine. It looks very delicious indeed," Mahiru responded.

"That's a relief. I was worried you wouldn't like it."

"Really? You already know that I'm not a picky eater, Amane-kun."

"Well, yes, I *do* know that, but I considered that maybe you weren't in the mood for it or something."

"I wouldn't complain after making such a vague request and leaving everything to you…"

Mahiru was touched simply by his thoughtfulness and spirit, but he had actually gone and prepared it for her. What's more, she had witnessed his journey from being nearly unable to cook to now showcasing the fruits of his hard work. How could she possibly have any complaints?

"Still, I'm surprised you decided to make a risotto."

“It’s because you didn’t seem like you completely lacked an appetite. I looked up some recipes online, and that’s how I decided. Instead of using consommé, I added white soy sauce, and a bit of miso for a more comforting taste. I tasted it myself, and I don’t think it turned out badly…”

“You’ve even grasped the art of making your own adjustments…”

“Getting that impressed about it makes me feel a bit awkward,” Amane admitted. “I *can* do it if I try, you know.”

Seeing Mahiru’s frozen reaction, Amane approached with a spoon in his hand, looking a bit conflicted. Mahiru smiled and thanked him as she accepted the spoon, then turned her attention back to the freshly made risotto.

“May I eat it now?”

“Yep. Go ahead,” Amane replied, watching her with a slightly nervous gaze. Smiling reassuringly at him, Mahiru murmured a quiet “Thank you for the food,” and scooped some risotto with her spoon. Knowing it was still piping hot, she gently blew on it to cool it down before tasting.

The risotto had a rich texture, with the rice cooked to a perfect firmness, offering a unique feel in the mouth. It seemed lighter than it looked, likely due to being made from raw rice, with a controlled viscosity that allowed it to pleasantly disperse in her mouth. The butter’s aroma and the smoothness of the soy milk were immediately apparent, while the white soy sauce subtly yet boldly anchored the flavor, creating a gentle and welcoming taste.

The miso Amane mentioned must have contributed to the dish’s subtle yet profound richness. Its presence was not too strong, providing depth to the flavor without overpowering it—a true secret ingredient. The finely chopped mushrooms blended well into the risotto, enhancing the overall umami and creating a comforting, savory, and reassuring taste.

“…What do you think?” Amane asked with a tinge of hesitance.

“It tastes delicious,” Mahiru answered.

“Aren’t you just trying to flatter me?”

“Don’t just assume that on your own, geez.”

As a matter of fact, she hadn’t frozen in place to think of a polite but insincere response, but rather due to being genuinely impressed by the deliciousness of the dish.

There isn’t any need for flattery between us anyway. Mahiru silently communicated this message with her gaze, to which Amane responded with a

look of slight regret.

"It *is* delicious," Mahiru insisted. "I can tell that you made it with great care. It has a gentle taste that brings out the flavor of the ingredients."

"Glad to hear that. I'll have some too." Seemingly embarrassed by her heartfelt praise, Amane began to eat his own portion of the risotto. He had already tasted it while cooking, so his reaction wasn't as dramatic as Mahiru's, but he seemed to enjoy it nonetheless, his eyes narrowing in satisfaction. "It's definitely tasty, but I've still got a long way to go compared to you, Mahiru."

"Why must you compare it to mine? I'm confused. In my eyes, it would take quite the talent to catch up to my ten years of cooking experience so quickly."

"Then it'll always be impossible for me."

Despite his rapid progress, Amane's cooking skills, experience, and knowledge were far from reaching Mahiru's level. While she had once thought that she would be in hot water if he ever caught up, she then realized that cooking together would still bring her the same joy, leading her to feel slightly ashamed of her selfish wish for him to depend on her.

"You say that, but your food is, in fact, delicious," Mahiru began to explain. "…This dish has a very warm taste—comforting, perhaps? To me, it feels as though your kindness was one of the ingredients."

"I don't think kindness can affect its flavor…" responded Amane.

"The flavor of a dish can be heavily influenced by one's mind. Knowing that you put your heart and soul into making it enhances its taste."

Cooking wasn't determined solely by skill. While the taste of a dish was obviously influenced by the cook's abilities, the thoughts and emotions of the cook also held the potential to shape the food they prepare.

Knowing the effort and care the chef put into the dish made it all the more delicious for Mahiru.

"…Furthermore, you are simply becoming a better cook, Amane-kun. The rice is cooked perfectly, and the flavors strike a delicate balance."

"I am honored to receive your praise."

"…You're teasing me now, aren't you?"

"No, I didn't mean it that way," he clarified. "…Genuinely, I'm grateful to you."

"*I'm* the one who should be grateful, geez."

She felt deeply appreciative for his awareness of her poor health, his

concern, allowing her to depend on him, and even cooking for her. Because of his kindness and thoughtfulness, Mahiru was able to let herself rely on him. She felt so well cared for that she couldn't ask for more, filled with gratitude.

Amane might not fully realize it himself, but his ability to be genuinely kind to others—a trait that seemed natural but was hard to come by—was one of his greatest strengths. Mahiru gazed at him, noticing that he seemed to remain doubtful toward her words, and murmured, "That's *just* like you," before continuing to eat her risotto.

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

After they both finished eating and took a moment to relax, Mahiru looked up at Amane, who was just about to start cleaning up.

"Next time…I'll make sure not to be such a burden," she raised.

Amane-kun's help made things much easier this time, but I don't believe it's fair for him to go to the trouble of cooking for the both of us.

…Or so she thought, but Amane's puzzled response caught her off guard. "Why?" she heard him say, her eyes widening at the remark.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'Why'? Was it not troublesome for you?"

"No, why would it be?" Amane replied, looking innocently perplexed. His next words, though, were reassuringly dependable. "If anything, I hope you can rely on me even more. If you're feeling unwell and still push yourself, you'll only make things worse for yourself. That's why I'd be much happier if you just rested."

"B-But still…"

"Besides, it isn't a burden to me at all. Honestly." Amane then seemed slightly disgruntled as he asked, "Am I *that* unreliable?"

Hearing this, Mahiru directed her gaze downward, unable to look him in the eye. "…If you say things like that, I might start relying on you a little too much."

"You can rely on me all you want. Look, you can even start right now. Just sit back while I take care of the dishes, okay? Leave the rest to me."

"…Okay," Mahiru returned meekly.

Amane, not considering Mahiru to be any trouble at all, smiled and said,

“Good. That’s what I like to hear.” He softly patted her head, prompting her to look at him with a blank stare.

I love him.

He was kind, considerate, and hardworking. He was someone she could always rely on. Amane’s way of encouraging her to rely on him, knowing she might be reluctant to do so, was a gesture of deep understanding and care. It was clear that he had thoroughly grasped her independent nature and was speaking from that understanding.

Someone like Amane-kun might be the ideal husband, Mahiru couldn’t help but daydream, thinking he would be the ideal husband—kind, thoughtful, and always making an effort. Lost in her thoughts, Mahiru continued to stare at Amane’s mature smile in awe until he raised an eyebrow in mild curiosity.

“…Are you perhaps not feeling well again? Do you want to head home and rest?” he asked, concerned by Mahiru’s dazed expression. He seemed to be under the impression that her condition had taken a turn for the worse.

Mahiru, realizing she had inadvertently worried him, quickly shook her head. “N-No, that’s not it! It’s just, um…will you promise not to laugh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“…I was thinking that you would make a good husband, Amane-kun,” she confessed, feeling embarrassed by her own out-of-character remark. Amane, however, didn’t react negatively. Instead, he appeared to be surprised and slightly bashful.

“I–It’s not like I mean anything by that though, okay!? It simply crossed my mind because you’re so caring, take the initiative, and watch over me…” Mahiru hurriedly explained, realizing her feelings were all too apparent.

She was acutely aware that she was unable to suppress her feelings, speaking impulsively without fully considering her words. The realization that her emotions were not as stable as usual was striking. As a blush crept onto her cheeks, Mahiru tried to conceal the heat rushing to her face, but to no effect. Being under Amane’s gaze only seemed to add fuel to the fire, making her feelings of joy and embarrassment burn even brighter.

“Uuu…” Unable to bear her awkwardness, she let out a pitiful moan—one of the top three most pathetic sounds she had ever made—and hung her head low. In turn, Amane too seemed visibly flustered.

“I-I’m happy you think so…b-but what I did is just what anyone would do,

okay? Come on, you should really go and rest," he said, his words rushing out a tad too quickly, almost stumbling over them, as he quickly gathered the dishes onto a tray and made a hasty retreat to the kitchen.

Left alone, Mahiru remained there, her body curled up, unable to lift her head. The physical pain she had felt was gone, replaced by a persistent warmth that refused to subside, and it took her a considerable amount of time to regain control over the blazing heat inside her.

The Future We Will Walk Towards

“(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs.”

The first time Mahiru was met with clear hostility was when her age entered the double-digits.

“You’re so unfair, Shiina-san.” A classmate suddenly blurted out on the way home from school, when they found themselves alone together. Usually, Mahiru walked home with some of her other friends, but today, since they had other plans, she ended up walking with another classmate of hers, a girl whom she didn’t interact much with. They just so happened to be heading in the same direction.

Mahiru interacted with everyone around her, and as such, didn’t find it a difficult task to talk with the girl. They had been engaging in a harmless conversation on their way home when she voiced this unexpected comment. It was only natural for Mahiru to be confused.

“I’m ‘unfair’? How?”

Not having specified what was unfair, Mahiru was puzzled as to what the girl meant. As she waited for her classmate’s explanation, the girl seemed to mistake her composure as arrogance and glared at her. The sudden hostility from a girl typically calm and reserved took Mahiru by surprise, leaving her unsure of how to respond.

Mahiru always conducted herself well at school. She never ostracized anyone and always made efforts to be friendly and keep a smile as she talked to others. Moreover, she didn't treat this classmate any differently than anybody else—she even tried subtly to include the girl when appropriate to ensure she wouldn't feel left out.

If she was upset about that, Mahiru could perhaps understand her feelings. However, the word the girl used was 'unfair,' which as far as Mahiru could tell, didn't seem to indicate any negative feelings about the way she interacted with her classmates.

Completely clueless, Mahiru's ignorance was apparent. Frustrated by this, the girl's eyebrows arched in a clear display of her irritation, her lips trembling as she tried to spin her words.

"Like, Suzuki-kun's just *all* over you," she explained, her tone of voice too sharp for her to just be sulking. Noticing that, Mahiru now understood the root of her dissatisfaction. But she still couldn't fathom why the girl deemed it 'unfair.' This 'Suzuki' the girl mentioned must have been a male classmate of hers. This boy was the only 'Suzuki' that had been interacting with Mahiru as of late.

Indeed, Suzuki had in fact talked to Mahiru on several occasions and even teased her at times, but in her eyes, it was nothing more than that. However, the girl seemed increasingly angered by Mahiru's seemingly indifferent attitude.

"He's always chatting with you, always trying to spend time with you, and always laughs when he's with you!"

She was correct that Suzuki, being the mood maker among the boys, and Mahiru, being prominent among the girls, had opportunities to talk. But that was the only reason. Although Suzuki was indeed giving her a fair amount of his attention, Mahiru, who responded uniformly to everyone, felt it was unfair to be attacked for something so trivial.

"Suzuki-kun fell for me first! Could you *not* just take him away from me!?"

"I'm not trying to," Mahiru responded. She wanted to add that Suzuki wasn't even 'hers' to begin with, but she sensed the girl wasn't in the mood to listen, so Mahiru had kept her reply brief.

"Why do you keep talking to him, then?" the girl questioned. "If you don't

actually like him, then just stop it."

"I've only ever spoken to him as a fellow classmate," Mahiru replied, stating it as a simple fact.

"You're so lying!"

There was no lie behind Mahiru's words. She had only told her the truth as she saw it, but to the girl, the story must have appeared differently. No matter how Mahiru explained her perspective, it seemed the girl wouldn't be convinced, which left Mahiru in a troublesome situation. To her, Suzuki was just a classmate, and she hadn't the slightest romantic interest in him at all. In fact, he was actually the kind of person she had a hard time dealing with.

Mahiru, while behaving well and being friendly, was actually a quiet person by nature who moved at her own pace, and she preferred not to have that pace disturbed. Mahiru couldn't bring herself to like someone who, despite not being on close terms, approached her as if they had always been good friends, especially when they didn't understand her disinterest and kept pushing forward.

But I see why she might think that. Mahiru contemplated that perhaps it wasn't unreasonable for the girl to misunderstand, given how he was always overly friendly and pushy with everyone, and that Mahiru had always interacted with him in a non-confrontational way.

I still don't remember acting like I was interested in him, though, Mahiru then thought. She felt a bit exasperated about the situation, which was unavoidable given the circumstances.

"Whatever. Just stay away from Suzuki-kun, got it?" the girl pressed.

Mahiru sighed in response. "If that's what you want, Inoue-san."

Though she felt somewhat bossed around, Mahiru had no particular desire to talk to Suzuki beyond being classmates, so she accepted it readily. She was perfectly content to maintain a certain level of distance from him. The girl snorted at this, seemingly satisfied with her answer, and pushed past Mahiru, running off as though she no longer had any use for her.

Left standing there, Mahiru watched the girl dash away, her school bag swaying all the while. "Wow," she muttered. While she wasn't well acquainted with her, the girl, who Mahiru thought was quiet and kept to herself, turned out to be hiding quite the intense temper. Reevaluating her impression of the girl, Mahiru continued on her way home as she usually did.

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“Ojou-sama, it’s common for people to become defensive when they sense someone they care about might be snatched away,” Koyuki explained tenderly. “This can happen a lot with children especially.”

Having never been in love herself, Mahiru couldn’t quite wrap her head around the girl’s feelings. When she told Koyuki, who had come to do housework, about what happened on the way home from school, Koyuki gently replied with a bittersweet smile. The way she responded was not to scold her, but rather it was a gentle, persuasive way of speaking, which only left Mahiru even more puzzled.

Becoming aggressive when in love was something she couldn’t understand at all.

Why take it out on others? She continued to wonder.

“‘Snatched away’?” Mahiru parroted. “But I don’t even want him.”

“A very sharp tongue indeed, Ojou-sama.”

But it’s true. I don’t even want him, Mahiru thought inwardly as she looked at Koyuki, who still had a wry smile on her face.

“You see, when a person falls in love, they often fear losing the one they like to someone else. They become anxious, afraid of the possibility that something they desire might be snatched away right before their eyes. So, to prevent this, they try to ward off any potential rivals who could pose a threat to them.”

“So she’s trying to keep me at bay?” Mahiru then asked.

“Precisely,” confirmed Koyuki.

This explanation helped Mahiru better understand the reasoning behind the girl’s behavior, but it also made her even more puzzled about other aspects.

“But Suzuki-san doesn’t even belong to her, does he? So I don’t understand why she told me not to ‘take him away’ from her. Since when did she earn the right to say things like that?” Mahiru wondered, puzzled by the girl’s assumption that Suzuki already belonged to her.

On the top of her head, Mahiru had never noticed any particular connection between him and the girl…but even as she searched her memory, she still couldn’t recall any times the girl made any moves on Suzuki. She had seen her approach him timidly, but that was all she had noticed.

“Not everyone is capable of separating emotions from facts like you, Ojou-sama. Perhaps you’ll come to understand these feelings someday, so be careful not to speak too harshly about them. And remember, saying you ‘don’t even want’ someone can cause arguments, so it’s best to keep such thoughts to yourself.”

“Why does that happen?”

“It can make them think, ‘What, so you don’t care about something that I want?’ They could feel as if you are belittling them and their desires, or implying that what they want isn’t actually worth seeking.”

“But that’s a strange reaction, isn’t it?” Mahiru noted. “Telling someone not to take something away, and then getting angry when they say they didn’t even want it to begin with.”

“People’s feelings are complicated, after all,” Koyuki replied, her vast life experience leaving Mahiru convinced of her perspective.

If Koyuki-san says so, it must be true, Mahiru reasoned. Nevertheless, she still couldn’t see herself getting involved with someone who was greatly swayed by their emotions.

“Being afraid to lose someone and actually projecting that feeling onto another person are two separate matters. You understand that, don’t you, Ojou-sama?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Excellent,” Koyuki approved, “…I believe that one day, when you find your special someone, you will come to understand that feeling—the anxiety of seeing the one you love looking at another girl.”

“My special someone…” Even though Koyuki had said that, Mahiru couldn’t quite grasp the concept.

Of all the relationships Mahiru had built, her favorite was her bond with Koyuki. However, her fondness for Koyuki was, of course, not rooted in romantic love, nor did Mahiru believe she would ever develop feelings for a boy that were stronger than her liking for Koyuki. She had once come across a book stating that girls mature faster mentally, a notion that seemed true to her. In her eyes, the boys in her class appeared rather childish. She never looked down on them, but their tendency to act on impulse or emotion often left her feeling exhausted.

Mahiru was also plenty aware that she was mature for her age, making her

feel an even greater disconnect from her peers. Perhaps it was simply a matter of not finding common ground in their conversations. Whatever the case, this self-awareness made it difficult for her to imagine falling in love with someone. However, she harbored a hope that such feelings might become possible as she grew older, and intended to heed Koyuki's advice, keeping an open mind about the future.

"If I ever do fall in love, I want to be careful not to lash out at other people."

"That's wise. If the person you like notices you getting upset about others around them, connecting with them could become a difficult task."

"Difficult…"

"Indeed. Now, Ojou-sama, imagine that there is someone who claims to like you. This person then starts acting hostile towards people you interact with, acting purely out of their own selfishness. How would that make you feel?"

"It would make me keep my distance."

It would be better not to associate with those kinds of people, Mahiru realized. That much was clear, even to her.

"Exactly. It can be frightening otherwise," Koyuki affirmed.

"Yes."

Mahiru couldn't imagine that someone who failed to cherish what she considered important could cherish her properly either. As she sensed that such a person would impose their selfish idea of "care" and end up causing harm, Mahiru had no desire to become close with someone like that. Reflecting on this, whether Suzuki truly liked Mahiru or not was now beside the point. The fact that the girl had acted aggressively toward someone he cared for marked her as potentially harmful in Mahiru's eyes.

Mahiru understood that the girl's aggressive behavior was fueled by feelings of jealousy, which was also something she deemed unfair. While Mahiru wasn't angry about this, she couldn't help but wonder why the girl hadn't been able to channel those feelings of jealousy into something more constructive for herself.

"It's a mystery to me," Mahiru began. "Why would she just say that it's unfair, instead of making an effort to be noticed by the person she likes? Does she think that, by calling the situation unfair, he will somehow come to like her?"

If the girl thought Mahiru was being unfair, perhaps the girl could have strived to be more like her. Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for her to

make an effort to catch his attention? While Mahiru wouldn't assert that she hadn't made any effort at all, from what she had seen, the girl hardly made any attempts to appeal to him. She neither actively initiated conversations nor seemed to make an effort to understand the things he liked.

Expecting to be loved back without making such efforts seemed impossible even to Mahiru, who admittedly had a limited understanding of romantic feelings.

"Hmm… Ojou-sama, you mustn't mention that to anybody else, okay?"

"I know. I only said it because I'm talking to you, Koyuki-san."

Despite her youth, Mahiru had figured out the boundaries of social interaction, understanding what could lead to ostracization. She had always tried to avoid upsetting others, navigating her way as the well-behaved girl she was known to be. Mahiru knew that her earlier questions weren't ones she should ask to the girl in question. Yet, she still couldn't fathom the question of 'why' all by herself. Thus, she chose to confide only in Koyuki, who was not only an adult but also someone she deeply trusted.

For Mahiru, working hard was simply the natural thing to do. Even though the process might be fraught with difficulties, the act of giving effort itself was not a burden to her. She believed that as long as the conditions weren't exceedingly harsh, perseverance would allow her to achieve her goals. But that was precisely why Mahiru found it all so perplexing.

Of course, nothing is for certain when it comes to people's relationships, but the other person will never look your way unless you make some kind of effort. So, why would anyone choose to neglect that? Do they think that just wishing for something is enough to get it? Mahiru asked herself. And then, there was something else—a slight but significant thought. For Mahiru, who had yearned for and yet never received a certain kind of affection/love despite her earnest efforts, there was one more crucial part she couldn't fathom. *She has already been given the love I longed for but never had, so why does she want even more than that? And all without giving any effort to achieve it?* Such thoughts swirled around in her mind.

While it was unknown whether Koyuki sensed Mahiru's complex emotions or not, she quietly smiled and gently bent down to meet Mahiru's eye level.

"Ojou-sama, you naturally give everything your best effort already, so it might be a little difficult for you to understand." Mahiru could detect faint hints

of something akin to pity, mixed with a bitter undertone, in her voice. “There are fewer people than you might imagine who can keep doing their best, enduring pain for a wish that may never be fulfilled. The ability to persevere like that can be considered a talent in its own right.”

“A talent…”

“Far too easily, people will hope for a stroke of good fortune to come their way without any effort… They tend to wait for the easiest solution.”

“Does good fortune like that actually exist?” Mahiru asked curiously.

“Hmm, let’s see… It’s true that occasionally, one might encounter fortune purely by chance. However, the crux of the matter lies in how one *uses* that fortune,” Koyuki elaborated. “People mistakenly believe that a sudden stroke of luck will continue to bless them time and time again. ‘Oh, it happened once before, so surely it will happen again,’ or so they assume…and once they experience that good fortune just once, they then attempt to replicate that one-time success a second time, and in turn, often neglect the effort that’s actually necessary to achieve it. As a result, they end up empty-handed, having wasted their time and possibly their only opportunity to obtain what they truly desired.”

Koyuki’s advice reminded Mahiru of a children’s song she’d heard once before, also sounding as though it was backed by real-life experience. She listened quietly to her words, which, though gentle, carried the sharpness of a lesson.

Seeing this, Koyuki offered her a warm smile. “We’ve digressed a bit, but you are someone who can persevere tirelessly, Ojou-sama. It’s a wonderful trait to have, and something you should take pride in.” Koyuki took Mahiru’s hand. “However, you still shouldn’t expect the same effort from others, okay?”

She might have grown, but Mahiru’s hands were still small compared to Koyuki’s, and they were covered by hers in their entirety, providing Mahiru a feeling she wasn’t averse to. In fact, she even found the gesture pleasing. In the truest sense, Mahiru had never had anyone reach out to her, and Koyuki, who understood her genuine emotions, was the only person whose touch Mahiru found truly comforting.

“Ojou-sama, should the time arise when you find someone you like, it is important that you give your best efforts to catch their attention,” Koyuki advised softly. “…There is no doubt in my mind that the person who meets your

standards will be truly wonderful indeed. But remember, such admirable individuals are often the object of many people's desires. If you fail to seize the opportunity to make them yours, they may very well slip through your fingers. Surely, you wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't…" Mahiru shook her head in agreement, yet she couldn't fully envision it. The idea of having someone she loved by her side was something she struggled to imagine. In truth, Mahiru was unfamiliar with the concept of someone being close to her, as it was an experience she had never had. "But that's only if I find someone I like, right? I don't think that will happen."

"Ojou-sama, how would you describe your ideal partner?" Koyuki asked.

"…Someone who can become family with me," Mahiru revealed. As soon as those words left her mouth, Koyuki's face clouded over, prompting Mahiru to immediately regret saying them. While the same went for her, Koyuki too was hypersensitive to the word 'family.' She was concerned about Mahiru's parental situation on a level much higher than anybody else.

Regardless, Mahiru had almost given up hope. No matter how much she wished or cried until her tears dried up, or clung to that hope, her parents would never give her the light of day. Thus, if she could ever find herself capable of loving someone else, she longed for a person who would stand by her side and spend their life with her as a family.

"If you find and foster a connection with the right person, I believe that over time, you can create a family together. But before reaching that stage, is there anything specific you intend to search for in a partner while dating?"

"…Someone who listens to me, stays with me, and makes me feel at ease when we're together would be nice. Someone who thinks things through with me when I'm struggling, and would stay by my side and wait for me when times are tough. That's what I would like," Mahiru responded thoughtfully.

Although Mahiru found it hard to imagine herself falling in love, she knew that if that moment ever became reality, it would be with someone with those qualities. Someone who would genuinely listen to her words, stay by her side, look only at her, and cherish her in her entirety. That was the kind of person she envisioned.

...But would someone like that really love me back?

Mahiru believed that at her core, she lacked an element of charm. She could

understand why someone might like her for the act that she maintained, but failed to imagine anyone loving her for who she truly was, stripped of her façade.

Moreover, Mahiru had yet to experience how it feels to develop romantic feelings for someone else, so it was natural that she couldn't truly grasp the concept.

It would be nice if someone like that was out there somewhere. She held onto this slender hope as she looked up at Koyuki, noticing a subtle firming of her grip on her hand.

"Ojou-sama, when the time comes, you will surely meet a wonderful individual yourself."

"…Okay."

"Nevertheless, you still mustn't fall in love with any rotten gentleman, okay? Avoid those who see you merely as a commodity, fail to treat you as an equal, or try to define who you should be as a person. Look for someone sincere and kind, someone who always acknowledges your efforts and accepts you for who you truly are," Koyuki urged. Her voice growing more and more hoarse, she then added, "…Ojou-sama, I can't remain by your side forever. That's why, all I can do is hope that you will one day find someone who makes you happy."

Mahiru finally understood why Koyuki had been so insistent in her advice. She wouldn't always be there for her.

Koyuki wasn't Mahiru's mother. She was a hired housekeeper—a stranger. Their relationship was fragile, dependent on the whims of Mahiru's parents. Should they choose to dismiss Koyuki, their relationship would shatter immediately.

Though she filled a role similar to that of a mother, Koyuki never acted as one. She always addressed Mahiru as 'Ojou-sama,' preserving a professional demeanor to avoid giving Mahiru any misguided expectations. Koyuki was aware that she could never truly take the place of Mahiru's mother.

Realizing this truth, communicated to her in a manner so distant and yet so direct, Mahiru bit her lip. Noticing her distress, Koyuki once again enveloped Mahiru's hand with her own, offering a comforting warmth. This gentle heat permeated from their clasped hands to Mahiru's eyes, her face teetering on the edge of tears.

"You mustn't neglect the effort required to be chosen by the one who will

bring you happiness, okay, Ojou-sama? You may be approached by a myriad of people. Some individuals might try to take advantage of you, while others may try to belittle you. However, never forget that the value you have cultivated in yourself will never change… It's neither just your appearance nor just your talents. Someone who will love you for who you are will one day appear before you."

Though not her mother, Koyuki was someone who worried about her more than anyone else, concerned about her future and gently guided her toward a brighter path. As Koyuki wove those caring words, Mahiru felt a tightness in her chest. Despite that, Mahiru nodded faintly in response, hanging her head all the while.

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"Well, in a way, that's how I've managed not to fall for any rotten men." Mahiru, whose eyes had been scanning pages that seemed a bit yellowed and faded, closed the diary she was reading, letting her impressions spill.

In the end, everything Koyuki-san had taught me turned out to be true, and my ideal qualities in a partner weren't wrong either, Mahiru thought. With a pat, the sound of the air being pushed out and the pages clapping together echoed, but Mahiru was unfazed as she closed her diary. She stood up and placed it on the table in front of her before sitting back down.

Without any hesitation, she leaned back greatly on her seat and turned her head up as if looking behind her. Her gaze met with Amane's, who had been serving as her makeshift sofa. Having grown quite accustomed to sitting between his legs, Mahiru, while still feeling a bit embarrassed, chose this position over sitting next to him, secretly pleased that it allowed them to stay even closer. However, Amane's brows were slightly furrowed.

Since they had been sitting close until just a moment ago, Mahiru didn't believe Amane had any issues with their current position, but she still couldn't help but wonder whether something was amiss. As she looked into his eyes, Amane muttered, "Why do I feel like I'm being made fun of here?" a dejected look clouding his face.

Now realizing that he had misunderstood her earlier mumbling, Mahiru

hastily shook her head and pulled Amane's wandering arms, which seemed hesitant to embrace her again, closer to her own body. "No, it's just a misunderstanding. As I was reading my diary, I suddenly recalled what Koyuki-san had taught me about never falling in love with a rotten man."

Up until a moment ago, Mahiru had been re-reading her diary while sitting between Amane's legs. Amane, who could have easily read the contents from his angle, chose not to peek out of respect for her privacy. However, Mahiru had still been sharing snippets from her diary, reminiscing about various incidents with a "Oh, something like this happened, didn't it?"

As they reminisced, happily laughing together over the recorded memories, Mahiru and Amane reflected on past events. However, Mahiru thought that Amane might struggle for how to react to stories of her early childhood, so she read those parts of her diary quietly to herself. It seemed that this led to her accidentally murmuring to herself, which Amane mistakenly took as a subtle jab to him.

"Oh, was that all?" Amane said. "It sounded like you suddenly had something to say, so…"

"I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. I just ended up saying it out loud as I was reminiscing…" Mahiru replied.

"Oh. It's fine, it's fine. I just went and got the wrong idea."

"…To be clear, you definitely aren't a rotten man, Amane-kun."

"But I *am* the spoiled rotten kind," he joked.

"Geez." Mahiru lightly scolded him in response to his teasing joke. "You keep talking about yourself with self-deprecating jokes lately, Amane-kun. Honestly."

"You think?" Amane responded quizzically.

"Indeed. How could anybody take a look at you and claim that you have bad qualities, Amane-kun? You're sharp, a capable homemaker, genuine, sincere, and gentle. You don't just find someone like that everyday, you know?"

"Are you sure you aren't wearing any rose-tinted glasses? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay. I'm wearing no such thing."

"You must be looking at me through some kind of filter then."

"*Like I said*, there's no such thing. Geez."

Amane seemed unable to accept honest, straightforward praise, which left Mahiru slightly bemused. She understood his feelings, so she decided to refrain

from going overboard with the praise. Amane himself might believe that he still had a long way to go, but in Mahiru's eyes, he was already more than enough, even perfect in his abilities. At the very least, he was now exceptionally skilled in a wide range of household tasks, enough to put other boys his age to shame.

Despite her high regard for him, it seemed that Amane himself was still not fully convinced of his own worth. While his desire to improve was commendable, Mahiru wished he could also better grasp his own strengths and qualities. "Amane-kun, you are already a fine, independent man. In fact, you should take things easy for a change and let yourself be spoiled a bit more, even if just for a day. It would give me the perfect chance to pamper you more."

"Please don't spoil people who are desperately asking *not* to be spoiled. I wanna spoil *you* instead, Mahiru."

"But if you did that, I wouldn't be in any condition to face others anymore…"

"I think we're already past that point, if you ask me," Amane retorted with a smile, wrapping his arms around Mahiru's stomach, to which she simply fell silent.

Mahiru was currently sitting between Amane's legs, using his body as a backrest, lounging comfortably. It was a relaxed, indulgent posture, one unthinkable to take in public settings as her pampered state would be on full display. To any onlookers, it would indeed appear as if Mahiru was being spoiled by him.

Amane, for his part, seemed genuinely pleased with Mahiru's affectionate behavior, willingly letting her have her way and even encouraging her to be more indulgent. He seemed to welcome their current situation, fully enjoying their time together.

"…I meant if you spoiled me even more," Mahiru meekly added.

"I, for one, would actually welcome that with open arms," Amane admitted. "I still want to respect and treat each other as equals, but at the same time, I also just want to keep pampering and doting on you," Amane whispered ever so tenderly, bringing his lips close and kissing the back of her head.

For a brief moment, Mahiru wondered, *Who was it that turned Amane-kun into such an unwittingly skillful charmer?* But she quickly dismissed the thought, realizing that probably she, along with his own parents, were the prime culprits. She decided not to dwell on it any further.

Even Mahiru herself, having been with Amane for several months now, realized that her actions had shaped his doting nature, so she couldn't blame him in the slightest. Moreover, being spoiled and showered with love by Amane was far from unpleasant for her. Thus, despite letting out groans of embarrassment, she let Amane do as he wished.

Although Amane was showering her with affection, his cautious and shy nature remained unchanged. His displays of love were gentle, often limited to kissing Mahiru's hair and enveloping her in a tender embrace. Amane held a principle of never wanting to do anything that might make Mahiru uncomfortable. Despite his bold words, in practice, he often acted in a somewhat reserved manner.

Yet, today, he seemed intent on lavishing Mahiru with plenty of his affection. He enveloped the demure Mahiru in his arms, refusing to let her go.

"…I should really tell Koyuki-san sometime soon," Mahiru mused. It was only natural for her to want to share with the person who had been most worried about her how she had found someone she loved, how she was now in a relationship, and how cherished she felt in this newfound bond.

"About us dating?" Amane returned.

"Yes," Mahiru affirmed, "…that I've found my ideal partner."

"…Your 'ideal'? *Me*?"

"While my ideal partner was, of course, someone who can truly love me… I have always wanted somebody who could also respect and care for me just as a regular girl—somebody who was willing to accept me as I am."

In essence, Mahiru's ideal was someone who respected and loved her for who she was, and Amane perfectly embodied this ideal. She could confidently say there would never be anyone else who cherished and understood Mahiru, someone who deeply loved her and respected her choices as Amane did. To her, he was a beacon of understanding and light in her life.

"Well, I'm honored to have met your standards," replied Amane.

"Quite the opposite," Mahiru said. "I'm the one surprised that I meet your standards, Amane-kun. Truth be told, I must have seemed like quite the handful before."

"You shouldn't sell yourself short like that, Mahiru."

"But…"

Mahiru recognized her own strengths and talents. Yet, she still believed there

were significant flaws in her personality. Beneath her angelic exterior, she possessed a keen, critical mind, but was also intrinsically lonely and anxious at heart. She longed for someone's presence while simultaneously resisting the idea of letting anyone get too close. *That* was the true nature of Shiina Mahiru—a mosaic of contradictions.

Amane had managed to reach through Mahiru's defenses, reaching out to the frightened child within. He didn't break down her walls or slip through a crack; instead, he knocked directly at the front door and spoke to her earnestly and directly, waiting patiently for Mahiru to extend her hand to him. His sincere and honest nature was something precious, although Amane himself might not fully realize that this trait he possessed was invaluable.

He really has no idea, does he?

Some might label Amane as indecisive or lacking assertiveness, depending on their perspective. However, for Mahiru, these traits were precisely what made Amane remarkable. That said, she still couldn't deny that there were times when his excessive caution proved a tad troublesome.

"I don't think I'll ever meet anyone more wonderful than you, Mahiru," Amane declared.

"Oh, are you settling for me?" Mahiru teased lightly.

"You know that's not the case," he responded earnestly. "…I'm not looking at anyone else but you anyways."

Even without being told, Mahiru was well aware that Amane only had eyes for her, so she couldn't help but giggle. "…Yes, I know." However, Amane took her laugh as teasing.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked, making a slightly sulky expression.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how lucky I really am." Surely, there was nobody in the world who wouldn't feel blissful after experiencing the love from their beloved.

"…Mahiru, are you…happy now?"

"Yes, very happy. Can't you tell just by looking at my face?"

Mahiru never thought of herself as an angel. Far from it. In her eyes, she was just an easy-to-understand girl—just Mahiru. Her joy, her anger, and her sorrow were all sensitive to his words and actions, just like any other girl. As she looked up at Amane from within his embrace, he saw the relaxed expression on Mahiru's face and smiled softly.

A look of relief softened his features. "*...Really? I'm glad*," he whispered, his voice imbued with sincere joy and contentment. At this, Mahiru's cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and she instinctively drew his arms closer around her, hugging him even more tightly. In response, Amane adjusted his embrace, making it simultaneously softer and firmer, wrapping her in a hold that was both comforting and reassuring.

"I'll never stop striving to make you even happier and happier. If you ever notice anything I'm lacking or failing to do properly, then do let me know."

"Well, I would say that the way you only ever think about me and not yourself is something you should really start to work on."

Amane's flaw lay in his tendency to neglect himself in favor of Mahiru. While his intentions were noble, Mahiru didn't find happiness in being prioritized at the expense of his well-being, and Amane, in his eagerness to please her, would sometimes overlook that fact. Mahiru understood that it was crucial to point out and gently reprimand this behavior. If left unchecked, it could lead to issues that would be detrimental to both of them in the long run.

"I-I didn't mean it like that… To me, your happiness is my happiness. If I just see your smile, then it makes me happy too."

"You're *such* a dummy, Amane-kun."

"…Why do you say that?"

"I mean, surely you must realize I feel the exact same way, right?" Mahiru explained, confident that the perceptive Amane would understand. After all, they were exactly alike in that respect.

Amane quickly grasped her point and, visibly crestfallen, lowered his eyebrows and apologized with a simple "…My bad." This candidness of his was another aspect Mahiru fondly appreciated, and she smiled warmly at him, feeling a deep affection for these sincere traits.

"As long as you understand. Haven't I told you this before, Amane-kun? Because I love you, seeing you look so happy fills me with joy in just the same way… So please, don't just prioritize me. You should prioritize yourself just as much, okay?"

Just as Amane's happiness was linked to Mahiru's, her joy was equally connected to his. Seeing her loved one spend his days without suffering and with a smile always brought her the greatest joy, filling her heart with immense contentment. Since they both share this sentiment, Mahiru considered herself

truly fortunate. She believed that Amane felt the same way.

“And please, let me make you happy too, Amane-kun. We should be happy *together*, right?”

It wasn’t enough for Mahiru to just feel happy or to just attain happiness on her own. The most important thing was finding happiness together with Amane.

They could never truly be happy if either type of happiness was lacking. That would only spark the beginning of misery.

"…Yeah," Amane replied, his words slightly choked. Mahiru watched as his face slowly transformed into a tender, slightly fuzzy smile. From her position nestled between his legs, she shifted her body to face him and assumed a traditional, upright kneeling position. And just like that, as if to seal his words with her own, Mahiru gently pressed her lips against his. As she released her lips and closely yet endearingly gazed into his eyes, Amane briefly gave a startled look before his expression shifted to one of bashful restraint, his lips tightly pursed.

"…Did that make you happy?" she asked, a devilish smile playing on her face.

Amane's eyes softened as if to say he was pleasantly defeated, his gaze remaining warm and close. "…Maybe I could do with just a little more."

With that, Amane, too, wore a mischievously playful smile, wrapping his arms around Mahiru and pulling her close, burying his face in her neck. "Oh, you." As this affectionate gesture tickled both her body and heart, Mahiru giggled softly and spoke in a voice that was more affectionate than scolding, accepting his kiss.

I should write about how incredibly happy I am right now, Mahiru thought, considering how to conclude her diary entry for the day.

Animate SS

Crowd Control is Key

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8.5 from the Animate Bookstore

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Huh? Do I get lonely when Amane-kun goes to work?" Mahiru uttered.

When Ayaka called her to have lunch together, Mahiru quickly found herself being posed such a question, prompting her to repeat it back with an inquisitive tone. Amane had plans to eat with Itsuki and Yuuta today, resulting in them each eating separately. Ayaka had invited Mahiru to dine in the cafeteria, where they both spread out their lunchboxes and began eating. However, Mahiru's hand paused when Ayaka suddenly posed that question, her chopsticks losing all motion.

"You know, since he started working because I recommended him, I'd feel bad if you ended up feeling anxious or lonely without him around," Ayaka explained.

"Hm…" Mahiru began thinking. "Of course, to say I'm not lonely would be a lie…but I don't intend to hold him back just because of that. After all, it's Amane-kun's choice, so it wouldn't be right for me to restrain him."

Ever since Amane started his part-time job, Mahiru had found herself spending more time alone at home. There was a part of her that earnestly awaited his return each day, often wishing he would come back earlier. Yet, despite these feelings of loneliness, she never thought of wanting to do something about it. She didn't want to be an obstacle holding Amane back from pursuing his goals. Should she act in such a manner, Mahiru would instantly be disappointed in herself for allowing it to happen.

"If it's something Amane-kun has decided to do, it's only natural that I should support him, right? After all, he's working hard to accomplish a clear goal he has in mind."

"Even if he doesn't tell you why?"

“If he chooses not to tell me, then he must have his reasons. I don’t expect him to tell me every little thing, nor do I try to pry into his business.”

“…You aren’t worried or anything?” Ayaka asked further.

“Worried…well, um, I would be upset if he entertained another girl’s advances, but I can’t imagine Amane-kun would ever be unfaithful.”

Mahiru was confident that Amane was not the type to tread dangerous paths, so she had no worries in that regard, especially concerning infidelity. She knew of no one who engaged with her as sincerely as Amane did. His deep affection and his nature to cherish those he opened his heart to was something she understood all too well.

As a result, when Mahiru firmly replied, “So, no, I am not worried,” Ayaka responded with a strangely delighted smile, almost as if chuckling with satisfaction. Mahiru wondered if she was just imagining the soft laughter that seemed to echo in response.

“It’s like, you really trust Fujimiya-kun a lot, don’t you?” Ayaka observed.

“Hehe, but of course. I know Amane-kun’s personality very well.”

“You’re totally head over heels for him. It’s *super* obvious.”

“…I-Is it really that obvious?”

“More like, anyone who can’t see that from our conversation must be blind. There’s not even any room for anyone else to step in. *That’s* just how lovey-dovey you guys are with each other.”

“L-Lovey-dovey…”

Ayaka briefly averted her eyes and flashed a knowing smile, then quickly turned back to Mahiru with a bright, cheerful expression.

“I mean, it’s also like you only have eyes for one another. You don’t even notice anyone else around you.”

“But that’s only natural. We are in a relationship, so there’s absolutely no chance I would look at other men. And even if one were to try to approach me, I wouldn’t respond to him…” Mahiru trailed off near the end. “Um, why are you smirking?”

“Oh, it’s nothing—I’m just once again struck by how deeply you love Fujimiya-kun,” Ayaka answered. “But I do wonder if he knows just *how* deep…”

The latter part of Ayaka’s statement was uttered in a volume barely audible to Mahiru, and her tone, almost as if she were sticking her nose where it didn’t

belong, struck Mahiru as oddly discomforting. Sensing occasional comforting glances from those around them, Mahiru looked at Ayaka and let out a sigh.

"…I can make things manage on my own…" Mahiru said, referring to her lonesome.

"But now that Fujimiya-kun has a job, other people might see it as their chance now that he isn't with you as much as before. So I just thought I'd try to subtly keep them at bay, as the one who gave them that false hope in the first place."

Grateful for Ayaka's thoughtfulness, Mahiru showed her appreciation, but internally she was puzzled as to why that would give others an opportunity to approach her.

Bookwalker SS

Bringing You the Taste of Happiness

Obtainable by Pre-Ordering Volume 8.5 from Bookwalker JP

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"What're you reading?"

Mahiru was relaxing on the sofa as usual, looking at something. It wasn't the diary she'd been reading the other day, but instead some sort of thick file. Amane couldn't just peek into it, so he cast a glance at it upon noticing the many papers filed inside.

Noticing Amane's gaze, Mahiru looked up and said, "Ah, you mean this?" as she closed the file. The cover now visible, Amane saw that it was labeled 'Recipe Collection' in systematic handwriting, different from Mahiru's usual script.

"This was given to me by Koyuki-san when she retired. By that time, I had already mastered and memorized all the recipes she taught me, but she had still compiled all of the recipes I'd learned until that point as 'proof of my skills' and gave it to me as a parting gift," Mahiru explained, fondly stroking the somewhat faded but carefully stored file with her fingertips. Her eyes reflected a sense of nostalgia—not at Amane—but likely for a certain someone else.

"I see… It must be very precious to you."

"It would be no exaggeration to say that this file contains the very origins of my cooking. Without Koyuki-san's guidance, I wouldn't be this skilled at cooking, and I probably would have never thought about making meals for you, Amane-kun."

"Got it. So it's not just the root of my happiness, but yours too. When you put it that way, it's incredibly precious and important."

For Amane, Mahiru's cooking was the very embodiment of happiness, and this file was the source of that joy, filled with happy memories for Mahiru.

“Should I leave you to it then? If you’re reminiscing on precious memories, it might be better if I left.”

“No, I’d rather you see them…I wish to share these happy memories of mine with you, Amane-kun.”

“Alright…then I’d love to see it as well.”

Mahiru gladly opened the file, revealing recipes written in neat, easy-to-read handwriting. It was filled with meticulous notes, the dates she first cooked each dish, and her impressions of the taste. Just looking at it conveyed a deep sense of love. The recipes ranged from simple to complex dishes, making it evident just how thoroughly Koyuki had trained Mahiru. Not to mention, it conveyed just how much Koyuki held Mahiru dear.

“Mind if I try cooking something from this?” Amane asked.

“I don’t mind, but…where did that come from?”

“Well, all your favorite and precious dishes are written here, right? That’s why I wanna try making them for you. Oh, but if it’ll ruin your memories or something, I won’t do it!”

Now that he had the chance, he wanted to recreate the taste of happiness for her. While it could’ve come across as egotistical considering his skill level, Mahiru blinked her large eyes and then broke into a youthful smile.

“…May I look forward to it? You know, I’m quite particular about flavor.” Mahiru teased.

“Argh, well, if you’d please guide and instruct me as needed, I’d appreciate it.”

Realizing that perfectly recreating the recipes Mahiru held dear would be impossible without her help, Amane requested her assistance. Mahiru laughed amusingly and said, “Leave it to me,” her voice bubbling with excitement.

Gamers SS

Pampering a Tired Amane-kun

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8.5 from the Gamers Bookstore

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Um, Amane-kun?"

"Yeah?"

"You appear to be quite tired," Mahiru mentioned to Amane, who was resting his head on her lap and pressing his face snugly against her stomach, to which he replied in a quiet voice, "Yeah."

Recently, Amane started a part-time job, adding unfamiliar work on top of his usual daily routine, which seemed to have tired him out. Although he usually acted as if he was fine, seeking comfort like this to recover mentally was something that he liked to do from time to time.

When Amane gets like this, he becomes meek and quite honest in seeking affection, which Mahiru actually finds quite delightful. However, Amane was shy and didn't often show his affectionate side openly. Him seeking comfort like he was now was a rare sight, and although Mahiru wanted to indulge him as much as possible, there was a slight complication…

"If that's the case, I believe it would be best for you to get some proper rest in bed."

Indeed, if one felt exhausted to the point of sleepiness, it was best to oblige and get some rest. Without resting on days off from his part-time job, there was a risk of him potentially collapsing, especially seeing as he wasn't yet accustomed to the new routine.

"…My batteries charge faster when I sleep on you, Mahiru. It heals me."

"That's all well and good, but you'll still experience better quality rest in bed, so let's move there, shall we? You'll like it much better than the sofa."

"…If you insist."

After Mahiru persuaded him kindly in a whisper, the very obedient Amane dismounted his head from Mahiru's thighs and got up with a wobble. She accompanied Amane carefully to his bedroom, where he lay down on the bed as if being sucked into it.

With a thud, letting the weight of his body sink into the bed, Amane gave Mahiru a look that clearly showed he was indeed sleepy.
"It's a very fluffy bed, see? …Amane-kun?"

"Mahiru…do you have anything to do after this?"

"Huh? Not particularly, no…"

Right as she finished replying, Mahiru was pulled by the hand and dragged onto the bed. There was no pain, only the sensation of the soft bed and the firmness of Amane's chest.

Realizing she was being embraced, Mahiru moved her face about and looked up, her eyes meeting Amane's. He was gazing back at her with tired yet pleading eyes.

"…Could you give me just a little bit of your time?"

Hearing his modest voice, Mahiru couldn't help but giggle. To her, it was amusing that despite having pulled off something so bold, Amane still seemed unsure whether she would accept.

"I suppose it can't be helped, can it?" Mahiru relented. "…Don't just say 'a little bit,' you may have as much of it as you want, especially since it's you, Amane-kun."

"Yeah…"

"You really do become obedient when you're sleepy, don't you?" *He wants to hug me just like he would a body pillow*, Mahiru thought, considering the way he hugged her.

Shortly after, she heard a muffled voice saying, "I can't unless I'm like this," making her realize that he just couldn't be this honest with himself when fully awake. With a wry chuckle, Mahiru gently tapped Amane on the back, lulling him to sleep.

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Good morning."

Mahiru, who had been dozing off on Amane's shoulder, slowly raised her head. Seeing this, Amane adjusted his face to align with her sleepy gaze and smiled.

Mahiru, with her soft, dazed expression, seemed to take a considerable amount of time to process Amane's words.

After her moment of disorientation passed, Mahiru's expression sharpened as she grasped the situation. "…W-Was I sleeping?"

"Yep, soundly."

"You should have woken me up."

"Hm? I don't see any reason to wake you when you're sleeping so peacefully."

Given the perfect, sleep-inducing weather, Amane understood why she'd felt drowsy. Moreover, after seeing Mahiru sleep with such a content expression, he couldn't bring himself to wake her.

Part of it was that he enjoyed watching her adorable sleeping face, though.

"Geez. I shouldn't sleep when I'm the one who came over to your place."

"Hmm, I don't mean this in a bad way, but…it doesn't feel that special anymore when you come over to my place, right? Like, it's part of our routine now…" Amane expressed. "Oh, but don't take it negatively like it doesn't matter anymore, alright? What I mean is, spending every day in the same space is normal for us now, and I think that's really nice."

Mahiru practically spent most of her time at Amane's house. Except for bath time and bedtime, it would be no exaggeration to say that she was always there.

The fact that this had become the norm for Amane and Mahiru was a pleasing reality.

"…And I get the added bonus of watching your sleeping face," Amane added.

"D-Don't say that—it's embarrassing. I don't want to show myself wearing such a defenseless expression."

"Well, it just means you feel relaxed and safe by my side. To me, it's adorable, and I can't help feeling happy about it."

"Th–There you go again saying things like that…" Mahiru gazed at him with a mix of mild embarrassment, reproach, and frustration. Amane responded with a light laugh, letting it slide.

Needless to say, Amane enjoyed watching the peaceful scene that was Mahiru soundly sleeping, but he was also happy knowing she could sleep so serenely. Despite Mahiru claiming that her experiences were a thing of the past, it seemed that her past memories occasionally disturbed her sleep, often leading to insomnia or nightmares. Therefore, seeing her able to sleep peacefully was undoubtedly a good thing.

While Amane kept those thoughts to himself and smiled, Mahiru still wore a somewhat annoyed expression. "…But you sleep next to me like that from time to time, don't you, Amane-kun?"

"Well that goes without saying, Mahiru," Amane quickly affirmed. "Lying beside you makes me feel comfortable and secure."

"*H-Hngng…*"

"What's with that look?"

"I'm a little frustrated that you can say that so casually… Are you really okay with me seeing your sleeping face?"

"Well, it's not like I lose anything from it."

"…In that case, going forward, I'll make sure to stare at your face when you're asleep. I shall observe it very closely."

It appeared Mahiru really wanted to get back at him, but to Amane, it neither bothered nor hurt him.

"Would that be fun?"

"Of course it would. I'll take my time admiring the sight of your adorable sleeping face. I can't wait for the next opportunity to do so."

"Well, do as you please."

“I must create the perfect sleeping environment for you, Amane-kun…some soothing background music, proper air conditioning, the right temperature, and…”

Seeing Mahiru so unexpectedly enthusiastic, Amane muttered, “All you have to do is lay beside me, Mahiru. I’ll sleep like a baby.” Overloaded by his comment, Mahiru headbutted him with a bright red face, leaving Amane no choice but to turn away, trying to hold back his laughter.

Suruga-ya SS

A Little Scheming and… Worry?

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8.5 from the Suruga-ya Bookstore

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"So, Sou-chan, what's your opinion on Fujimiya-kun?" Ayaka asked suddenly, casually waltzing into Souji's room in the midst of one of his exercises. Souji himself was used to Ayaka barging into his room without notice—in fact, he had allowed her, so he paid it no mind. Still, Souji was slightly baffled by her sudden question. Only slightly, as he had gotten used to Ayaka's tendency to bring up abrupt topics.

"Not sure what to say, honestly… He's a pretty chill guy to be around, I guess."

She probably means as his coworker, Souji guessed.

Amane was both a classmate and friend of Ayaka's, but she was the one who had invited him to the job, so it seemed she was concerned about how things were progressing on that end.

Souji had no bad impressions of Amane, his new colleague at work and a fellow schoolmate. Although Amane was surrounded by lively people, Ayaka included, he himself tended to be rather calm and unassuming. He was more reserved than outgoing, and he had a gentle demeanor. Souji considered him sensible and found his company neither uncomfortable nor burdensome, even in silence.

Based on this, Souji neither had any qualms or issues with Amane. However, a smirk strangely began to creep onto Ayaka's face as she heard his response.

"I see, I see," she said in a light tone.

"What's with the grin?" Souji returned.

"*Hmm*? Sou-chan, you haven't realized that you actually like him a lot, have you?"

Souji blinked several times at her comment, seeing Ayaka's face loosen up in amusement more and more each time. "…Fujimiya isn't annoying. That's all," he responded

"After all, you don't like annoying people, do you?"

"Yeah. Though you can also be annoying at times, Ayaka."

"Does that mean you actually hate me!?"

"No. What bugs me are people who lack common sense, consideration, and an on-off switch. Ayaka, you might be a social butterfly outside but you're actually the type who gets quietly absorbed in your own hobbies."

"Exactly, like how I'm getting absorbed in you!"

"Right, right. Don't casually try to cop a feel of my abs."

As Ayaka playfully ran her hands over his stomach as he did sit-ups, Souji narrowed his eyes at her. She murmured, "Surely it won't do any harm…" sounding a bit dissatisfied, yet she gracefully stepped back, knowing she was getting in the way.

Usually, Ayaka would watch Souji work out with a cheerful smile, but today, there was a sense of relief in her expression, a smile of contentment that seemed to say she was pleased.

"But, I gotcha. If that's the case, I'm glad. It was worth introducing you two," she murmured more to convince herself than to converse with Souji, who then quietly sighed and sat up.

"Ayaka, you might've been worried because I don't have many friends at school, but it never really bothered me," he explained.

Souji tended to get along better with older people than those of his own age. He was neither out of place in his class nor closely associated with any particular group. He maintained a stance of not getting too involved, and he didn't find this situation bothersome. However, it seemed that Ayaka had been worried about this aspect of Souji's social interactions.

"I do have people I'm close to, and I also have you, Ayaka. No complaints from me," Souji reassured her.

He wanted to convey that his current situation in his class was simply a matter of personal choice, and there was no need for her to feel concerned. However, Ayaka replied with a nonsensical remark, saying, "Sou-chan, you don't realize that your looks can scare people to death. Maybe that's why you

get along with Fujimiya-kun.” Hearing this, Souji could only tilt his head in bewilderment.

Toranoana SS

Their Adorable Child

Obtainable by Purchasing Volume 8.5 from the Toranoana Bookstore

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Shihoko exhaled a drawn-out sigh. "Oh dear, I'm already starting to miss Mahiru-chan…"

Despite having just seen her, Shihoko was already expressing her longing for Mahiru, leaving her husband Shuuto with nothing but a wry smile. She adored Mahiru like her own daughter, or more accurately, she already saw her as a daughter-in-law in her heart, always seeking opportunities to dote on Mahiru whenever possible.

Mahiru herself seemed to enjoy Shihoko's attention, so as long as it wasn't too excessive, Shuuto had no intention of stopping her. Besides, in his eyes, Mahiru was also someone he cared for deeply, so he didn't feel the need to intervene in his wife's affection for her.

"You really love Shiina-san, don't you?" Shuuto remarked.

"Of course I do. I've always wished to have a daughter," Shihoko replied dreamily.

Shuuto smiled gently, but deep down, he felt a twinge of pain knowing that he could never truly fulfill that wish for her. Shihoko was unable to have children of her own anymore. It wasn't an issue of age, but rather, her physical condition made it impossible. There had been no problems when Amane was conceived, but complications during his birth led to lasting effects that prevented her from having more children. If she were to conceive again, there would be no guarantee for either of their lives.

Shuuto hadn't told Amane the whole truth, fearing he would blame himself, so he'd just mentioned that it was due to illness. He had no intention of revealing the truth in the future. They were saddened to learn that they could no

longer have more children, but having Amane, their precious son, was more than enough for them to feel immense joy.

"Oh, just to make it clear, I don't have any complaints about Amane, okay? I'm truly blessed to have had him. I couldn't be happier that he was born safely, and never once have I regretted that moment. He'll always be my dear son." Shihoko spoke with an untroubled smile. "Otherwise, I wouldn't love him so much, would I?" she added, and Shuuto felt the pain in his heart ease at her words. "Even so, I've always wished for a daughter too. I dreamed of coordinating our outfits and enjoying a girls' day out."

"And, given that, you would like to do those things with Shiina-san?"

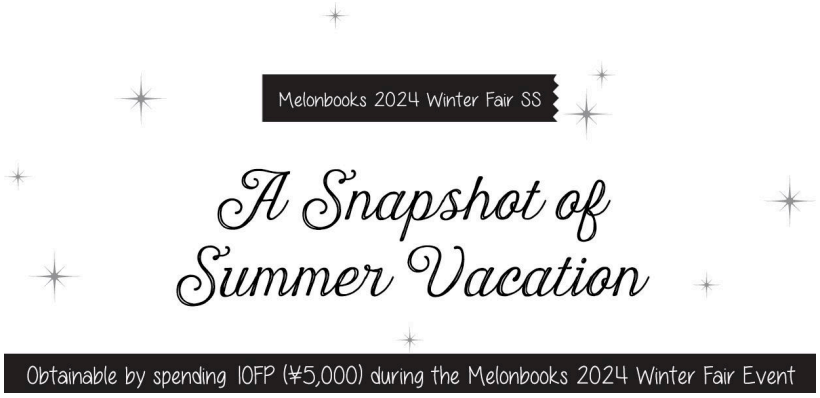
"Yes, though it's not that I see her as a replacement or anything… Mahiru-chan's just so cute, so I'd love to see her in different outfits. She looks stunning in anything she wears. And considering how Amane's acting, she's practically like my own daughter already. I wonder if they would be okay with that?"

"Well, you could try asking her and Amane what they think directly," Shuuto suggested.

"…Though I do wonder whether Amane would let me. He's surprisingly possessive."

"Hard to say. That would come down to your convincing skills, Shihoko-san."

Shuuto thought to himself that as long as Mahiru didn't object to it, Amane would probably let Shihoko do whatever she liked. Seeing her enthusiasm, however, he chose not to say anything that might dampen her spirits. Watching her great anticipation for the next opportunity to see Mahiru, Shuuto felt relieved that the sorrowful expression she once wore was a thing of the past, and he buried those old memories deep in the back of his mind once more.



“When you guys think summer vacation, what comes to mind?”

“Homework, I suppose.”

“Yeah. Homework.”

“Why do you have to respond with answers so devoid of hope and dreams…?”

On an otherwise normal day, not long after summer vacation had begun, Chitose had stunted a surprise attack on their house and barged in, only to pose them that very question. Amane, who had been diligently working on his assignments in the living room alongside Mahiru, naturally found their answers to be quite obvious. However, Chitose cast a deeply dissatisfied glance his way.

“This goes without saying, but we’re in the middle of said homework right now,” Amane said.

“Aw, c’moooon! Let’s play~!”

“Sure, after I finish the parts I’ve set aside for today.”

“Stingy!”

“How can you say that? We gave you a warm welcome even though you showed up out of the blue *uninvited*.”

Since Chitose visited without any prior notice, Amane believed that she should consider herself lucky for just being allowed inside like normal. They had let her in because they happened to be at home working on their assignments together, but he began to wonder what Chitose would have done if both he and Mahiru had been out instead.

“I mean, it’s ’cause the aircon in my house has been acting up, so I’m having a repairman take a look at it,” Chitose claimed. “Can’t blame me for going somewhere cool in the meantime, right?”

It seemed that Chitose’s visit was prompted by her home’s air conditioning breaking down, seeking refuge from the heat at Amane’s place before succumbing to it. Incidentally, Chitose claimed in a voice full of certainty that the reason she first came to Amane’s apartment rather than Mahiru’s was because “Mahirun’s probably at Amane’s anyways.” Mahiru began blushing faintly as she realized Chitose had hit the nail on the head.

So, having decided to spend about half a day at their place for whatever reason, Chitose suddenly shouted, “I’m so bored!” after watching Amane and Mahiru silently working on their assignments across the low table for a while. She began to plop herself on the sofa, arms raised high and legs sprawled out.

“You know, if you’re *that* bored, you could’ve just brought your own homework over.”

“Absolutely *not*.”

Chitose made a clear show of refusing, but Amane could already tell that she would later come crying for help with a “Help me, Mahirun!” towards the end of summer vacation.

With this foreseeable outcome, Amane let out a sigh of exasperation before standing up. “Alright, fine. I’ll give you a very important task to do, seeing as you’re clearly bored out of your mind.”

Likening Chitose to a kid that needs a new toy to settle down is kinda rude, but whatever. Thinking this, Amane headed to the storage room to fetch a box that had been left there.

The moment Chitose saw the box, her eyes sparkled with excitement. “Whoa! A shaved ice machine! You had one!?”

Inside the box was a shaved ice machine, which, for some reason, Shihoko had recently sent to them. Written on the outside of the box was a message saying, “I won this in a lottery, so I’m sending it over to you. Get along well with Mahiru-chan, okay?” perfectly conveying her intention to present Mahiru with a bit of summer fun.

For Mahiru’s sake, Amane decided to graciously accept her gift, preparing ice as well as several types of syrup and toppings. However, he never imagined that he’d actually end up using it now.

“I’ve prepared some ice and even syrup for you. Now, come on, get to work.”

“Yaaay! Alright! I’m gonna try making a rainbow one!”

Chitose’s excitement was clear as day as she declared her desire to create something that sounded quite spectacular. A glance in Mahiru’s direction revealed that her eyes were twinkling away with a hint of expectation and excitement, albeit just a little.

“Are you not a fan of shaved ice, Mahiru?” Amane asked.

“I tend not to visit festivals and the like, so I haven’t actually tried it before…although I’m surprised to learn that you can make them at home too.”

“We used to have it quite often at my old house. We had to limit ourselves though, since eating too much could give us upset stomachs.” Seeing Mahiru reminisce about the past with a solemn expression, Amane playfully tried to cheer her up. He relaxed his cheeks into a smile after seeing Mahiru respond with a brief giggle.

“What flavor would you like, Mahirun? Shall we both go for rainbow ones?” Chitose’s cheerful voice also chimed in, and Mahiru’s expression shifted back to the soft and gentle one she wore prior.

“Do we have enough syrups needed to make a rainbow one?”

“Hmm, if we mix some together, it should probably work out. Let’s make our tongues all co–lor–ful together~!”

“What an invitation. But don’t you come crying to us when you scream at your reflection in the mirror!”

“It’ll be fine! Just think of it as a summer memory, see?”

Mahiru giggled. “Yes, that’s right. I shall go along with your suggestion, Chitose-san.”

“Leave it to me!”

As Mahiru had likely never experienced such silly antics before, Chitose’s invitation must have been quite the delight for her. With a voice more cheerful than usual, Mahiru asked Chitose to choose for her, which made Amane break out into a soft smile as he gathered all the homework on the table into one pile. Of course, it went without saying that afterwards, Amane got roped into it as well, and all three of them ended up with their tongues turning into a colorful disaster.

Afterword

Author's Message

Thank you very much for picking up this book.

My name is Saeki-san, your author. Have you enjoyed the second collection of short stories in *The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten*?

With this volume, I was finally able to introduce Koyuki, the housekeeper of the Shiina family. While her name had been brought up several times in the main story, she had yet to make a debut. There simply wasn't any opportunity for her to appear, unless I decided to introduce her in this way.

Mahiru may have inherited her parents' looks, but her attitude and way of thinking vastly resembles Koyuki's instead, a crucial detail from her childhood. Raised by the super-capable mom, Koyuki-san, Mahiru will likely grow up in her image. *Probably.*

I also had plenty of fun writing side stories where she flirted with Amane-kun, engaged in mental gymnastics to scope out Kadowaki-kun, and depicting her as a de facto member (*bride*) of the Fujimiya family. The first side story collection featured Itsuki and Chitose heavily, so this time, I focused more on Yuuta, Shihoko and Shuuto. I also wanted to include Ayaka too.

Writing this, I was struck by thoughts such as… *Amane looks super dependable through Mahiru's eyes, doesn't he…?* and… *She's totally crazy about him, isn't she…?* But this was already super obvious in the main story too, so no surprises there!

This volume also features wonderful illustrations drawn by Hanekoto-sensei. She drew a rendition of Alice in Wonderland for the Special Edition Cover, and this is something we wouldn't see in the main story. Its cuteness had me rolling on the floor! Mahiru looks so gorgeous in a pinafore…*as does Amane with his*

bunny ears.

The regular edition cover is super cute, too… I was all, *Am I even allowed to look at her in her pajamas!?* She's still proper, yet there's a hint of allure about her that's very appealing. Moreover, I'm greatly looking forward to seeing the Special Edition Booklet, which includes an Illustration Gallery made by Hanekoto. Even though I have the digital images, I still find myself wanting the paper version…!

To wrap things up, I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone who has helped publish this book.

To the chief editor, everyone in the editorial department at GA Bunko, everyone in the sales department, the proofreader, Hanekoto-sensei, the printers, and everyone who currently has this book in hand: *Thank you very much.*

See you in the next volume. Thank you for reading all the way to the end!

✧ ₊ ✦ ₊ ✧

I hope you enjoyed. Fan translator, Indi writing.

Without further ado, I would like to extend my thanks to ***Dil*** for providing the volume's raw and *Bookwalker* Short Story; and ***Trevor***, ***aritakun***, ***Uzumi Kum***, and ***CN2025*** for the *Animate*, *Gamers*, *Melonbooks*, *Suruga-ya*, *Toranoana*, and *Melonbooks 2024 Winter Fair* Short Stories.

For the readers in the discord who have waited a whole six months for us to release the EPUB/PDF: *yeah…sorry, we tried our best*. Total word count: 81,889.

I would like to thank our primary accuracy checker, ***Zel***, for helping me with every and all lines that I couldn't wrap my head around, and ***SPACEBAR***, ***Granger***, ***Kine***, and ***SecreFTL*** for helping with the preliminary translations of the volume! Big thanks also to ***SoTipsyy***, ***Stem***, ***Dil***, and ***existence is pain*** for helping to proofread each chapter.

I also extend my greatest gratitude to ***Doram*** and ***bzk***,` our editors, who have both performed a fantastic job as always.

Do make sure to tell them how much you appreciate the blood, sweat, and tears that they shed for this in our discord server over at ***discord.gg/otonari***, and

thank you for reading our fan translation.

Don't forget to support the series in other ways!

See the Fan Translator Page for the relevant hyperlinks, and please purchase the official English Translation by ***Yen Press*** once available in your country. As of this translation, they have English translations up to Volume 6, with Volume 7 set to release June 18th! I hope you will continue to enjoy this series!

Short Stories

The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten
Volume 8.5 Special Edition Booklet

Free from Ashes; No Need for Glass Slippers

Included in the Volume 8.5 Special Edition Booklet

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Cinderella let out a deep sigh. The root of her predicament was her stepsisters.

"Hmm, I think this one brings out more of Cinderella's cuteness," one said.

"Really? But don't the frills look kinda childish?" the other argued. "The one with the laces emphasizes her beauty *way* more if you ask me."

Cinderella had been turned into a dress-up doll.

Truth be told, she was rather indifferent to her parents' divorce. They seldom showed their faces at home, and they never once showed her their love. As she grew up mostly under the care of servants, Cinderella had no comments to make regarding her mother's absence or her father's remarriage. Though a part of her wished he had at least consulted her beforehand, she knew that as a mere daughter, she had no right to question the will of the head of the family.

With the arrival of her stepmother, Cinderella hadn't anticipated that she would also gain stepsiblings. It came as quite the shock when she found herself with two stepsisters a year or two older than herself. Soon after, both her father and stepmother began to avoid coming home even more than before. Her father had always been a workaholic, and it appeared that her stepmother, perhaps due to her position, had married him out of necessity rather than choice. Consequently, they both immersed themselves in their respective jobs, leaving the children to their own devices.

Thus, the responsible Cinderella was left to take care of her new two stepsisters. Fortunately, her stepsisters treated her kindly. Aside from practically abandoning her children, Cinderella's stepmother was a rational individual, and in turn, her daughters were sensible and fond of lovely things—particularly the beautiful Cinderella. They continued to adore her greatly, even to this day.

"I think Cinderella would look great in pink," one stepsister suggested.

“Maybe a light blue instead would make for more of a prim and proper look?” the other recommended.

The stepsister with the red hair and the other with her hair tied up in a ponytail were busy fussing over Cinderella’s dresses, discussing which one would suit her best. On the other hand, Cinderella simply wished to get started on the housework.

With her father, the head of the household, frequently absent due to work, and her stepmother, who should have assumed the role of the lady of the house, also working alongside him, Cinderella was left without any real authority at home. Had she had been granted the power to manage the household, she could have arranged for help to some extent in her stepmother’s stead. However, lacking such authority, she was just a young girl with limited influence. Luckily, they were provided with adequate funds for their living expenses, so while they weren’t in financial distress, they still found themselves in a situation where they had to take care of their daily needs by themselves.

“*Cinderella~*, what do you think of this dress?”

“It’s quite pretty, but it seems impractical for chores like cooking and cleaning,” Cinderella judged.

“C’mooon!”

The dress they were suggesting was one with a large ball gown skirt, which was clearly unsuitable for doing household chores.

“We’ll handle the cleaning, then. Okay?” one offered.

“Have you already forgotten how you dropped a bag of flour and turned the floor into a mess, or how you tipped over a bucket of water, flooding everything?” Cinderella reminded them.

“I’m sorry.”

“Please be more careful next time.” When Cinderella gently advised them while mentioning their earlier mishaps, they were quick to apologize.

Their home, while technically classed as a mansion, was modest for a noble’s residence. Their lifestyle almost resembled that of a commoner’s. Consequently, they didn’t require much help with household chores, but if things were excessively untidy, it became too much for Cinderella to handle alone. Usually, she would turn to their neighbor for assistance, but she felt guilty about relying on him too often and preferred to manage as much as possible on her own.

“Dressing myself up is unnecessary. Besides, I still need to prepare lunch for both of you,” Cinderella explained.

“*And* for the guy next door, right?”

“Stepsister, please.” Cinderella chided her, giving her a sharp look.

“Sorry…” The red-haired stepsister quickly apologized with a bow of her head, earning a laugh from the other.

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One day, while Cinderella was getting along with her new, growing family, an invitation arrived at her house. It was an invitation from the palace, which puzzled them at first, but upon opening it, they found it was for a ball at the castle.

The invitation seemed to be especially targeting young ladies of marrying age, and the three of them exchanged glances and shrugged.

“So it’s essentially a party to choose a partner for the crown prince.” They had heard that the prince was around their age, so it seemed likely.

“…Is it based on looks?” wondered Cinderella. The idea of finding a partner at a ball made her assume that it would mostly be about appearances. However, perhaps she only carried that train of thought due to her cynical way of thinking. Cinderella was by no means a dreamer or idealistic—she thought it would be more practical to decide on a fiancé from childhood and educate them accordingly.

“Well, having a partner with good looks can be a great way to show off to other countries, I suppose,” one stepsister mentioned

“But shouldn’t education, intelligence, and character be more important for a representative of the nation?”

“Maybe they wanna work on that after the fact? All the invitees are unmarried noblewomen of a certain age, so they’ve probably somewhat screened the candidates already, right?”

“Really? Sending an invitation to a minor noble family such as ours could suggest that they’re just trying to cast a wide net.”

All three of them made speculations while looking at the invitation. Any normal noblewoman would see this as a great opportunity, but the three of them

had no such desires and were just confused by the invitation. They even considered the invitation a nuisance.

They felt it would be improper for all of them to skip the event, as much as they wanted to pretend that they hadn't been invited. It meant that the palace had specifically recognized their house.

"Hmm, what should we do?" one asked.

"I have no interest in becoming Queen, but I am interested in the party's food."

"Indeed…"

It might seem greedy, but Cinderella couldn't help but think that dining in the royal palace must be an entirely different experience from their everyday meals. The dishes she prepared were homely and common, but at the palace, she imagined there would be a lot to learn, particularly in terms of cooking techniques and flavoring, even if the ingredients were the same.

"If it's a party hosted by the royal family, the food must be wonderful, right? I was hoping it would serve as a reference for my cooking… Then perhaps I could prepare something special for you two as well as my stepsisters."

"Cinderella…!" the stepsisters exclaimed, hugging her tightly. Cinderella groaned as they squeezed her, but they paid her no mind and affectionately rubbed their cheeks against hers. Aware of their affection, Cinderella accepted the gesture with a small, wry smile. She didn't dislike the way they showed their fondness for her.

After a while of hugging, one stepsister, wearing a troubled frown, said, "I'd love to go with Cinderella, but we can't take her… The prince might set his sights on her."

"True that. If we bring our adorable little Cinderella with us, she might get chosen. And that'd stir up all kinds of trouble."

"I don't think that would happen, though…" Cinderella voiced.

Cinderella was aware of her good looks, but she didn't consider herself one of the most beautiful women out there. She thought the likelihood of other women being chosen over her was far much higher.

Cinderella saw her invitation to the ball as almost just making up the numbers. She doubted the prince would consider marrying someone from a nearly powerless minor noble family.

Contrary to Cinderella's somewhat pessimistic view, her stepsisters wore

serious expressions on their faces. “No way, it totally would! Our Cinderella is so adorable!”

“Exactly! We need to find a good husband for our Cinderella!”

“We just need to find suitable partners at the party ourselves, and we’ll be in the clear!”

This took Cinderella by surprise. “Are you two not thinking of inheriting the house in my stead?” she asked. Cinderella had no particular attachment to the house and would have no complaints if either of her stepsisters decided to take over. She felt she was better equipped than her stepsisters to survive in the common world, and was even prepared to run away from home if the situation called for it.

Her light comment was met with sudden seriousness from both stepsisters, who turned their quiet, intense gazes on her. “Cinderella.”

“Yes?”

“We can’t inherit the house since we don’t share blood with our stepfather. If anyone but you inherits, it would be like completely taking over the house.”

“How blunt of you,” Cinderella replied.

Bloodline-wise, it made sense. The house’s bloodline was with her father, not the stepmother. Had her stepsisters been biological children of her father, they would’ve had the right to inherit the house, but being the stepmother’s children, they were not originally related to the house. Even though they were adopted into the family, Cinderella remained the rightful heir.

“We understand our place in this house, don’t worry,” one stepsister said.

“Our mother knows that too, so she tries to stay away as much as possible,” the other added.

“Huh? Really?” Cinderella replied. “I assumed she was just busy with work.”

“Well, that’s part of it. But also, we…we told her we wanted a sister, so um… Did we bother you?” They both looked at Cinderella, downhearted.

Despite both stepsisters being taller than Cinderella, they appeared awfully adorable to her. She quickly shook her head in denial. “No, I too wished to have a family. I’m happy that you two decided to come.”

“*Cinderella…!*”

“You’re familiar with how Father acts, right? He doesn’t quite feel like family, so I’m glad to have both of you here,” Cinderella told them with a smile.

The stepsisters exchanged glances and then whispered among themselves.

"Would stepfather let me off if I slapped him one time?"

"I think Mother deserves the same treatment…"

Cinderella had a feeling she heard something rather risky, but she pretended not to hear the contents of their little conversation.

Returning to the original topic, one stepsister said, "You don't like dealing with royalty, do you, Cinderella? You think it's a hassle, right?"

Having her personality read like a book, Cinderella looked away.

"And besides…*y'know*."

"*Right?*"

They looked past Cinderella's averted gaze. She was looking through a window. On the other side of the glass was their neighbor's house—the residence of someone they often relied on.

"…What are you implying?"

"*Nuthin?*"

"*Heh heh heh.*"

Cinderella knew what they were hinting at, but chose not to verbalize it. Saying it out loud would mean acknowledging her feelings, which she wasn't ready to do. Her stepsisters, however, continued to show their affectionately mischievous smiles and gazes.

"Maybe we'll run into stepfather if we attend the ball?" one of the stepsisters wondered.

"We don't need to go, then."

"Wow, you sure decided fast."

"It's fine. Things will only get sour if we see him."

Their father, though a workaholic, wasn't particularly power-hungry. If he were, he would have likely married them off to high-ranking nobles for his own benefit. In that sense, they felt relieved about him, but his character was, to put it mildly, lacking. His neglect of his three daughters alone was enough to keep him off any list of commendable parents.

Besides, if they did meet their father now, Cinderella wasn't even sure how to react. She could probably say a thing or two in resentment, but they didn't even have a relationship that justified voicing such grievances. It was best to avoid him as much as possible.

"We aren't all required to go to this ball, are we?" Cinderella asked.

“Don’t think so, as far as I can tell,” one answered.

“Then it’s decided. I’ll stay here, and only you two—my stepsisters—will attend,” Cinderella concluded. She encouraged them to enjoy the food on her behalf, to which they responded with a wry smile and a nod.

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As Cinderella watched her stepsisters depart for the ball, she returned to her usual task of tending the garden, where she let out a sigh. She wasn’t particularly bothered about missing a de facto matchmaking party, but she felt a mix of loneliness from being separated from her beloved stepsisters and disappointment at missing out on the delicious food. Her sigh must have been heard, as she sensed someone standing nearby.

It was someone whose presence she welcomed rather than saw as an intrusion. “Wizard-san.”

“What’s the matter? Why are you sighing?” he asked lightly.

Turning to her side, she saw her neighbor, who she saw almost every day. He belonged to a family of wizards and often helped around her house, considering it might be difficult for only girls. He started helping when Cinderella’s father was rarely home, leaving her to live modestly with just one servant, something he just couldn’t bear to see. His assistance continued even after the servant retired and when her stepsisters arrived, always being by her side.

She offered him meals as thanks for his help, but he did so much for her that she felt meals alone couldn’t suffice. Cinderella was torn between gratitude and guilt, and now, after being addressed by him, she felt a warm sensation stir in her heart.

“Oh, it’s just that my stepsisters have both went to the ball, and…”

“Oh, right, that’s being held today, isn’t it? Did they leave you behind, Cinderella?”

“They did.”

“…But why? Don’t they both adore you?” The wizard, who often visited, was well aware of the stepsisters’ affection for Cinderella and seemed surprised they would leave her.

“They said it’s to prevent the prince from taking a fancy to me.”

“Ohhh.” He seemed to understand and exhaled in what appeared to be relief, puzzling Cinderella.

He was part of a wizard family that had been in the country for a long time and occasionally interacted with the royal family. Given this, he should understand that the royals wouldn’t consider someone from a minor noble family like Cinderella’s. Yet, his reaction suggested something else, which intrigued Cinderella.

“But realistically speaking, isn’t it impossible for the prince to fall for someone like me?”

“Not really. With how cute you are, it wouldn’t be strange if he did.”

Feeling her cheeks heat up at the direct compliment, Cinderella bit the inside of her cheek lightly to avoid showing her welling embarrassment on her face.

“I disagree. A future king wouldn’t marry a girl without any significant backing. I don’t think His Majesty would allow it, and at best, I might be a mere concubine.”

“A very realistic way of thinking… Don’t you wish to be admired?”

“Even if we temporarily ignored the issues of bloodline and family background, I would eventually be criticized for those very reasons at the royal palace. The burden would be too much, regardless of how elegant the lifestyle promised. I’d definitely hate it,” she explained.

Cinderella didn’t yearn for a lavish life. The presence of her parents was slightly unsettling, but she was content with her kind stepsisters, a life free from worry of food and clothing, and the cherished wizard next door who enjoyed her meals with a smile. She was satisfied as things currently were.

“I want to live a stable life,” Cinderella admitted. “I have no desire to throw myself into an environment where my life or mind would be at stake.”

“Yeah, I’m both relieved and worried that you’re so grounded in reality. It’s clear that you dislike the idea…” he mused.

“And what about you, Wizard-san? Don’t you want to be employed at the royal palace?” she asked. Wizards were rare in number, which made them valuable assets. Though he seemed to use magic only for daily tasks and kept his identity as a wizard concealed, Cinderella believed his abilities were substantial enough to warrant an invitation from the palace. He had fiercely used his powers to protect her from danger, proving himself as a strong, kind, and righteous wizard with a will to protect.

“Ah, no way. With position comes great responsibility, and reckless use of magic could eventually lead to one’s demise. I’d rather avoid my own ruin or the country’s downfall, so living quietly in the town is happier for me,” he declared.

“See? You feel the same way, Wizard-san.”

“…Yeah, I guess so,” he agreed to her suggestion that they were the same, shrugging and smiling as he ruffled her hair. It felt patronizing, and she would glare at him, but his gentle, affectionate gaze made it hard for her to say anything.

“*Hmph.*” Pouting, she tapped his large hand, playfully admonishing him. This only softened his obsidian eyes further, leaving Cinderella without a comeback. “…Oh, by the way, why were you here?”

Thinking back, this wasn’t the usual time for the wizard to appear. Although he didn’t publicly declare himself a wizard, he was known as a pharmacist, selling highly effective medicines that were the talk of the town.

Cinderella had assumed he would be at his shop today, so she asked him why that wasn’t the case. He seemed awkwardly evasive, saying, “Ahh, about that, well…” his words trailing off.

She stared at him, wondering if something was wrong, as he didn’t need to be so evasive if he simply closed his pharmacy for a day. Finally, as if resigning himself to his fate, he spoke, “…Uh, I saw you from over there, and I thought you were crying. You were looking down and shaking.”

Hearing the wizard’s bashful mutter, Cinderella couldn’t help but smile. “I see. You were worried about me.”

“What, should I not have?” His voice and demeanor became defensive, a sure sign of embarrassment. Knowing this from their long acquaintance, Cinderella smiled gently, not wanting to tease him.

“No, I’m happy about it. I’m sorry for making you worry. I was just feeling a bit down about not going to the ball.”

“So you did want to go, after all?”

“Well, not exactly…promise you won’t laugh?”

“I won’t.”

Hesitant to share her true feelings, but not wanting to let him misunderstand it was due to something severe, she slowly revealed her regret through her hesitation. “I just wanted to try the delicious food there and get some

inspiration," she admitted, feeling a bit embarrassed to admit her food-focused reasons for wanting to attend.

The wizard, who had been listening intently, blinked in surprise. Then, inevitably, his mouth twitched as he tried to suppress a laugh. His body shook slightly, so it mustn't have been her imagination.

"You promised you wouldn't laugh!" she protested.

"I'm not…laughing," the wizard claimed as he stifled a chuckle.

"That's it! No more of my cooking for you!"

"I'm sorry!" he laughed yet also rushed to apologize as she declared to revoke his food rights.

"*Geez!*" Cinderella playfully tapped his shoulder, which was as high as she could reach on his tall frame. His shockingly solid build didn't budge, and the slight embarrassment from this realization made her continue her light-hearted assault. The wizard just laughed, tickled by her actions.

After a while, Cinderella stopped her harmless barrage and looked up at him, now smiling differently. Gently patting her shoulder, he reassured her, "You don't need to take inspiration from the castle's lavish food. Your cooking is delicious already. I eat it almost every day and can guarantee it."

"…Thank you. But still, wouldn't you like to eat food that's even more delicious?"

"Me? I'm not really into food that's too fancy. The occasional luxury meal is nice, but for daily meals, I definitely prefer your cooking."

"I see, I see…" Cinderella giggled, feeling content with his affirmation that he preferred her cooking. Cinderella knew she was simple to feel so fulfilled by such a comment, but she didn't dislike this part of herself. Being praised by someone important was enough to fill her with joy. Even without going to the castle, she felt overwhelmingly fortunate to have these small moments of happiness.

"You seem quite pleased," the wizard said.

"I am, that's why. I'm happy to hear that you want to eat my meals every day."

"…Wouldn't you normally get annoyed by that? You know, having to take care of a freeloader daily."

"Why? You pay for your meals in addition to helping me take care of the house. Plus, I know how you secretly protect us," Cinderella replied. While the

wizard lightly joked about freeloading, Cinderella felt she was the one benefiting more. He had been looking out for and helping her since when she only had one servant, often coming to save the day when male assistance was needed. He would protect her whenever strange men tried to woo her, going as far as to accompany her into town next time for peace of mind.

But that wasn't all. She also suspected he was using magic or something similar to safeguard their home. She always felt a sense of protection around the house, which had never faced any danger despite being inhabited only by women. The fact that he provided such care and only asked for meals in return made her feel all the more grateful, believing she was the one who should be more grateful, not him.

"Please, act like you didn't notice anything," urged the wizard.

"Oh, did I hit the nail on the head?"

"…Just forget about it. If I admit it, it'd seem like I'm trying to make you owe me a favor," he replied. He was always modest and didn't like to boast, but Cinderella always wanted to express her gratitude.

She smiled warmly as she looked at his face, which was growing redder and redder. "I'm always grateful for your help. Thank you."

"Likewise, I'm also grateful," the wizard replied. "Thank you for accepting someone like me, an outcast."

"My, since when did you become an outcast? You're always welcome here," Cinderella reassured him. Both she and her stepsisters welcomed the wizard. The stepsisters, in fact, often encouraged Cinderella to take action, making her wonder what being accepted really meant if he wasn't already. He might lack self-confidence, but to Cinderella, he was a respected and dearly beloved figure.

Lips pursed, the wizard appeared to be holding back something. Cinderella reached out her hand, and his eyes widened in surprise. "Come on, my stepsisters aren't home today, so we can relax inside. Please, come in," she said.

"N-No, no matter how close our families are, it's not proper for a young, unmarried woman to be alone with a man in her house. Your stepsisters wouldn't approve either."

He may be a wizard wielding powers beyond common sense, but he was quite conventional and cautious about social norms. He likely hadn't realized that this was a trait that often frustrated Cinderella.

"If anything, they actually encouraged me."

“What do they think they’re doing…?”

“They told me to ‘catch’ you while they’re away. Will you let me catch you?” she asked, her question almost rhetorical as she firmly took his rugged hand. He looked bewildered but soon smiled resignedly, his eyebrows drooping as though troubled.

Cinderella cherished these moments when he showed such innocent expressions, finding them especially lovable.

“Now you’ve caught yourself a handy wizard, huh?” he commented.

“…It’s not like I wanted to do this just because you’re a wizard, though?”

“Huh?”

“Let’s begin by correcting that misunderstanding,” she said, realizing he still didn’t comprehend that he was valued for himself, not just for his magical abilities. To Cinderella, he had long ceased to be merely a wizard—he was her prince charming.

“Will you let me catch you?” she asked, hoping he would finally understand. Looking into his eyes, she saw his usually concealed dark eyes now mixed with shades of embarrassment and joy, bashfully cast down.

Realizing she had successfully ’caught’ him, Cinderella couldn’t help but laugh, though she wondered if it made her seem ungracious. Yet, she couldn’t hide her high spirits and let her joy show on her face.

“…I think *you’re* the one who’s been caught, if you ask me,” he retorted.

“Oh? Well that means things have worked out perfectly. Let’s spend today talking a lot, so you understand better,” she proposed.

“What a silly girl you are.”

“Hehe. We’ll see which one of us is the silly one sooner or later.”

We’re both silly in our own way, Cinderella thought. She led her prince charming by the hand into their modest house, disappearing together from the world outside.

One Day, When I Woke Up...

Included in the Volume 8.5 Special Edition Booklet

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

Upon waking up in the morning, Amane realized he was no longer himself. He noticed something was amiss as soon as he opened his eyes—right in front of him was his own familiar black hair.

Of course, even a laid-back student like Amane wouldn't skip looking in the mirror as part of his daily routine. He had been taking better care of himself lately, often checking his appearance and paying more attention to his hair, as he'd been making more of an effort to maintain it than before.

And now, that very hair was right in front of his eyes.

Something wasn't quite right, and Amane could tell immediately. His hair wasn't just obscuring his vision—it was as if his whole head had moved in front of his eyes. Confusion overwhelmed him.

"Wait, what's hap…*huh*?"

Then came another overwhelming feeling that something was out of place, this time even stronger. The voice that escaped from his lips was spun in an unusually cute tone. Being in his second year in high school, his voice had long since changed, meaning his natural tone was deep and low. Despite this, a high-pitched voice as clear and soft as a bell rang out.

Overwhelmed by the unexpectedly cute, yet eerily familiar voice, Amane instinctively felt his throat with his hand. The neck he touched was surprisingly slender. He then instinctively looked down to peek at his hands, only to let out a garbled sound that barely formed words. Gone were his usual rugged fingers and palm, replaced by delicate and unblemished hands. Beyond his view of his palm was his normal black hair, as was the face he saw in the mirror every day.

It was at that very moment that he realized exactly what was in front of him.

His blood ran cold.

…That's…me?

No matter how he looked at it, in front of him was the face he'd gotten used to seeing in the mirror up until yesterday. If his memory served him right, Mahiru had come over to stay the night because she had trouble falling asleep, haunted by dreams of the past. He agreed, which led to them to sleep together. Up until that point, there hadn't been anything out of the ordinary.

Amane leaned in, still confused, to get a closer look at his peacefully sleeping self just inches away. As he did, strands of flaxen hair smoothly flowed over his shoulders, and that's when it finally dawned on his groggy mind. A quick glance at his body confirmed it: there were soft bumps and curves in places that were all but impossible on his own body. And adorning this curvaceous body was a frilly, adorable negligee—the very same one Amane had complimented as adorable the night before.

He started to piece it together, even if his mind was rejecting the absurdity of the situation. Still, common sense said it was impossible. They weren't living in a fantasy world; the idea that his consciousness could transfer into someone else's body was beyond belief.

"…*Nnn*."

As he sat up, clutching his head, he noticed signs of waking from the body beside him—the body that was his own until moments ago.

Right now, Amane was in Mahiru's body.

So, who was in his body now?

The answer came immediately.

"…Amane-kun?" A voice, coarser than usual having just woken up, spilled out. Yet, it was tinged with a hint of youthfulness as it reached his ears.

Hearing a way of addressing himself that he would never use, Amane felt as though his vision began to blur into darkness for a moment. For an instant, he entertained the thought, but truly, he could never have imagined that they had actually switched bodies. The idea that something ripped right out of a fantasy story could occur was mind-boggling.

A drowsy gaze with unfocused, blurry eyes caught his attention. Mahiru's black pupils flickered open and close, not yet fully awake.

"…Uh, Mahiru-*san*?" Amane called out.

"…Yes? …*Hm*?" Clearly surprised, the voice that responded echoed in a

pitch just as high as Amane's.

Then, while still appearing somewhat dazed, Mahiru cleared her throat several times in an attempt to settle her morning voice. Slowly, she began opening her eyes wide and clear. The moment her jet-black eyes caught sight of Amane—who was presumably in her body—she abruptly sat up with a thud.

With enough momentum to call it a jump, Mahiru sat up, looking completely and utterly confused. She grasped Amane's shoulders, comparing him with herself. Her eyes darted around in bewilderment.

Amane gave an awkward smile and gently rested his hand on Mahiru's arm. "Yeah, sorry, I get it. I understand how you feel, but please just calm down, okay?"

Amane found himself in the bizarre situation of trying to console Mahiru while using her own voice, something he had mixed feelings about doing. Nevertheless, if he gave in to panic and confusion as well, it would only worsen the situation. Ensuring to keep his composure, he gave her a reassuring smile, and Mahiru's grip on his shoulders loosened.

"Um, well, I'm—"

"Don't worry, I already know. You're Mahiru, right?"

Smiling at Mahiru while in her body might seem likely to cause further confusion, but he knew that he needed to act unperturbed in order to calm the situation. Therefore, he made every effort to soothe her with as much tranquility and calmness as he could muster.

Mahiru, faced with her own figure, finally realized that it was Amane that was currently habiting her body, although her eyes still moved about in a frenzy. Then, upon looking down at the body she was in and recognizing it as Amane's, she let out a cry as if she'd just come to a startling realization.

Her voice was tinged with so much sorrow that it was almost begging for sympathy, causing Amane to also break out into a frown. Wanting to cry was a feeling that they both shared. Amane shook his head to dispel the heavy anxiety weighing on him and gripped Mahiru's hand, who was still lost in confusion.

"Wh-What's happening? You're Amane-kun, right!?" Mahiru shrieked.

"It's beyond me. When I woke up, I was already like this, and I started freaking out too when I first realized what was going on. I was sleeping next to myself somehow, and my body had become yours."

It was a situation so absurd that, for Amane and Mahiru, it was not just a

bolt from the blue but a full-blown cataclysm. Mahiru's agitation was completely and utterly understandable. Perhaps it was odd that Amane was even able to process the situation so straightforwardly.

The fact that they had swapped bodies seemed to settle in Mahiru's mind, and her eyes began to water slightly. Though she didn't cry, the surface of her eyes trembled as if she might shed tears at any moment, and the sight of his own face on the verge of crying caused him a pang in his stomach.

"Wh-What should we do?" sputtered Mahiru.

"I'd like to know the answer to that myself," Amane returned. "…Like, actually. I mean, we only slept together like normal last night."

"Th-That was supposed to be the case, yes."

If they had to point out something that was out of the ordinary, it was just that Mahiru had come over after waking up in the middle of the night due to nightmares. However, this had already happened once before, and if sharing a bed could cause people to swap bodies, there would already be reports from married couples all around the world.

No matter how one looked at it, the situation felt like something straight out of a dream.

"Even if we tried to do it ourselves, swapping bodies just isn't realistically possible," Amane emphasized.

"While I do think that's true…t-to think we'd end up in such an absurd situation…"

"Just relax. Let's first calm ourselves down and think about identifying the cause and planning what to do next."

"…You seem rather calm."

"When I see someone panicking more than me, it actually makes me feel calmer…especially when I'm seeing my *own* face panicking, it sort of—grounds me."

Perhaps because Mahiru was displaying enough emotions for the both of them—panic, confusion, anxiety—he found himself eerily calm. A significant part of that was also due to seeing his own face, which he'd never use to make such expressions, in front of him.

"…Excuse me for panicking so much…"

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to blame you. It's only natural to panic in a situation like this. If I were alone, I would've been panicking like crazy. I'm only able to

stay calm because I'm seeing how panicked you are."

With a gentle pat, Amane stroked Mahiru's head as he usually would. The need to raise his arm a bit higher than usual and the feel of her short black hair served as a painful reminder that he was not in his own body.

To remain a dependable figure in Mahiru's life, he feigned calmness, even if he wasn't completely unfazed. In turn, Mahiru regained her composure, her black eyes finally focusing squarely on Amane. Noticing this, Amane smiled at her, to which she ever so subtly averted her gaze.

"Have you calmed down?" Amane asked.

"…Yes."

Mahiru's cool and soothing voice was a relief to him in times like these. Simply hearing it naturally restored his composure. Perhaps it was an example of what's called 1/f (pink) noise, but he couldn't say for certain. Still, it was clear that the tone in which she spoke had a calming effect strong enough to settle distress.

Speaking gently to soothe her, Amane waited for the right moment when Mahiru's heart had settled before continuing. "So, all that we've gathered so far is that we've swapped bodies. I can't think of any reason why this would happen either. I'm stumped."

"I don't think we'll manage to find out the cause even if we try…" lamented Mahiru.

"But we'd have an easier time if we did know. I've never even heard of body-switching outside of fiction."

"Y-You have a point, but still…"

In the sixteen plus years he had lived in this world, Amane had never heard of such a case where individuals swapped bodies. If such people existed, it wouldn't at all be strange for them to be on the news. Any reasonable person would probably send the individuals to a hospital for examination. And if it turned out to be true, it would certainly be a hot topic.

From a scientific standpoint, body-switching was an unimaginable occurrence—at least, according to the common sense that Amane had cultivated so far. However, it had actually happened to them. It was for that very reason that Amane was so utterly confused

"We don't know the reason or cause for why this is happening, so let's not dwell on it much for now," he suggested. "The more pressing issue is what we

should do going forward."

"Going forward…?" Mahiru parroted.

"Today's Saturday, and neither of us have any plans. We also have tomorrow off, so we at least have some leeway there. If we can switch back during this time, we can continue our lives as if nothing happened. But what if we can't switch back?"

The sound of swallowing saliva could be heard.

"We'd have to live pretending to be each other," Amane continued. "That's something I'd really prefer not to endure."

Before he could even consider whether he liked it or not, substituting for someone else, especially a girl, was completely out of the question.

Amane couldn't possibly maintain the meticulous skincare this body required, nor keep up with the unique intricacies of girl friendships. Mahiru, on her part, was quite uncomfortable around boys, so it proved hard to imagine her enduring the casual physical contact common in male social circles. The disparity in their behavior would be evident to those around them.

Mahiru seemed to be imagining this possibility herself. Her face turned pale, which only highlighted the recklessness of trying to navigate each other's lives.

"In any case, it's better if we get used to handling each other's bodies while searching for a way to get back to normal. If we don't return in a few days, we should go to the hospital, even if they suspect it's a neurological or psychological issue."

"…Okay."

Thinking about the future filled Amane and Mahiru with a sense of gloom that could only be expressed through sighs. Nonetheless, the reality that they had switched bodies was an incontrovertible fact between them.

They both dropped their shoulders dejectedly as they looked at the bodies they had switched into. Upon reexamining his current body, Amane found Mahiru's body to be quite slender and soft. While he felt uncomfortable and somewhat rude looking at a woman's chest, he couldn't help but marvel at how, as a woman, it obscured the view towards one's feet.

If someone said that Mahiru had a more curvaceous figure than most, that would be putting it mildly. With how often she covered her legs and how mindful she always appeared to be, Amane found himself inadvertently staring down at those regions.

Mahiru, noticing where Amane's gaze was directed, stared back at him pointedly. She stared at him with roughly twenty percent of the glare Amane would usually direct at Itsuki after one of his usual jokes. Normally, Amane wouldn't think much of the stare, but he immediately sensed that she was suspicious of something.

"S-Sorry! I didn't mean to look in that way, really! I apologize!" Amane exclaimed in a panic.

"You don't need to apologize that much. I know that you were just double checking that it was a woman's body."

She didn't seem angry, but the slight exasperation mixed with her acceptance made Amane's cheeks twitch. "L-Let me just say this though. I haven't tried to do anything indecent. I swear, I can say that much."

"I know that. If you had, you wouldn't be able to look me in the eye. I don't believe that you would do anything weird."

"That's quite the way to show trust in someone. But no, I wouldn't do anything like that."

While he'd be lying if he claimed to have no interest in his lover's body, Amane's sense of guilt outweighed said interest. His conscience wouldn't allow him to mess around with a body that wasn't his own, so he was careful to avoid any careless actions.

"Right? That's why I'm not particularly worried. That said, I am curious about your body, Amane-kun."

"Huh?" Surprised, Amane accidentally let out a silly voice.

His mouth hung open in astonishment. He hadn't expected Mahiru to say that she was interested in his body.

Mahiru, seemingly oblivious to his now racing heart, placed her hand over her heart. "After all, it's my first time living in a man's body. I'm naturally curious about how different our physical abilities might be. I do work out myself, so I'm by no means weak, but I know I can't compare to the strength of a man."

"Ah, that's what you meant…" Relief washed over Amane in the next moment, only to be replaced by a feeling of shame and an urge to punch himself due to where his thoughts had initially wandered. Knowing that he was currently inhabiting Mahiru's body, not his own, he instead clenched his cheek to endure it.

When the utterly innocent Mahiru—with a curious expression—asked, “What else could it mean?” Amane nearly made a bizarre face in an effort to maintain composure. He managed to blandly reply, “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Although Mahiru appeared puzzled at first, she blushed after piecing together their previous conversation, blinking away. “…I wouldn’t do anything like that, dummy.”

Mahiru, having now accurately deduced Amane’s thoughts, opted to pinch his cheeks lightly. There was no pain whatsoever, suggesting that she was still figuring out how to handle moving a man’s body. All Amane could do was utter a slightly deflated, “Sorry,” in response.

After letting Mahiru do as she pleased for a while, they decided it would be odd to spend the entire time on the bed. Thus, they agreed to take a break and begin preparing breakfast, but then…

“First, let’s get changed, shall w—?” Mahiru began to suggest, before stopping herself in her tracks. “…”

“…Do you think we can?” returned Amane.

Of course, a problem arose. Because they, a boy and a girl, switched bodies with each other, issues such as changing clothes and the like naturally came into play. No matter how romantically involved they were, the prospect of seeing Mahiru’s body—given their innocent relationship—was not only difficult but posed an immense sense of guilt. Similarly, Mahiru would likely prefer not to have her body seen so suddenly.

“Personally, I don’t mind as long as you don’t look below,” Mahiru declared.

“Don’t ask for the impossible. You don’t think you’ll be seen, Mahiru?”

“…So, are you saying it’s more likely that you’ll give in to your curiosity, sneak a peek, then feel guilty and avoid eye contact?”

“Stop it with the eerily accurate predictions.”

From what he could tell, it seemed that Mahiru didn’t particularly mind being seen. What seemed to interest her more was how Amane would act and handle the situation. While this could be a sign that she was becoming mentally more at ease, which was generally a good thing, it was hardly a comfortable position to be in for the one being teased.

“…You could pick out some clothes that I can change into with my eyes closed. Or maybe you could help me change, Mahiru.”

“That would be the safest option. I bought a dress today when I went shopping, so if you raise your arms with your eyes closed, I can help you into it.”

“That’d be great.”

When Amane chose the most straightforward option, Mahiru nodded right after, knowing fully that he would. “C’mon, don’t tease me.” Despite Amane’s soft counter to her actions, Mahiru gave her first smile of the day.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

After getting dressed with Mahiru’s help and completing his morning skincare routine under her guidance, Amane took a moment to relax, savoring the breakfast she had made.

Although Amane had some experience in the kitchen, watching Mahiru cook so skillfully in his body made him wonder if he could also prepare food as efficiently as her in her body. That said, it was worth noting that while her cooking skills were impressive, her unfamiliar height posed some challenges, resulting in her handling some tasks awkwardly and even a moment where Mahiru bumped her head against the range hood. She didn’t appear to be in pain, but the shock of the impact was surprising.

After finishing the cleanup, Mahiru returned to the living room and, seeing Amane seated on the sofa, she stared intently at him and then shrugged her shoulders. “So it really is true… I’m in your body, huh?”

“Seems like it, yeah…” Amane responded.

“You look quite drained already.”

“I’m just trying to be careful, Mahiru. Especially since it’s your body.”

Amane wouldn’t mind if his own body was treated roughly, but the body he was currently inhabiting was Mahiru’s—not his own. Her skin was flawless, her body slender yet toned in a feminine way. The thought that his usual actions might harm her body made him act with great caution. Mahiru had always taken great care in maintaining her physique, so he felt an immense responsibility not to move around carelessly, which naturally led to a build-up of tension and fatigue. The mere consciousness of being in a girl’s body was mentally draining, so it would be more accurate to say that he was experiencing both physical and mental exhaustion.

“I can’t be careless with your body. If something were to happen to you because of me, I don’t think I could forgive myself.”

“I don’t believe that you would get injured just by going about daily life.”

“Says the girl who just bumped her head on the range hood earlier.”

“Uuu… I–I’m sorry.”

Amane hadn’t meant to scold her, but Mahiru seemed to take it that way and shrunk back. He quickly shook his head to reassure her. “No no, it’s fine. Looks like just a minor bump. It didn’t hurt, did it?”

“N-No, it didn’t hurt, but…it’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry,” Amane put her mind at ease. “…Regardless, it’s still true that we have to be careful. We aren’t used to these bodies yet.”

“You’re right…” When Amane explained that they both had many things to be cautious about, Mahiru agreed while nodding her head. Then, she narrowed her eyes as though something had just struck her.

Amane’s original body naturally had an intense gaze, but Mahiru made it look particularly menacing. Seeing this, Amane himself resolved to be more mindful of his gaze once he returned to his own body, noticing how significantly it affected how he looked.

Not knowing why Mahiru had been staring at him, Amane looked at her with a fair amount of caution. Mahiru sighed softly and patted her thighs gently.

“Amane-kun, keep your legs closed. It’s unladylike.”

“Sorry.” It seemed that, although unconsciously, Amane had spread his legs slightly apart. Normally, he wouldn’t think much of it, but he was in Mahiru’s body, and if her skirt was short, someone could easily see her underwear from the front.

Girls have it tough, huh. Even the small gestures matter, Amane thought after consciously closing the gap between his thighs. Seeing this, Mahiru smiled and nodded in approval.

“Much better. While there’s nobody else here, it’s a good thing that you’re wearing a long dress today. With a regular girl’s school uniform, you can actually see through the tights, so you have to stay vigilant.”

“Very true.”

“However, since you generally don’t have such careless habits, perhaps you could manage to fool people with just a bit of focus?”

“Let’s just hope I won’t have the opportunity to ‘fool’ anyone…”

Given that it would involve interacting with others, both Amane and Mahiru wanted to return to their original bodies as soon as possible during their days off, but it was uncertain whether things would go that smoothly. After all, as they couldn't even fathom the reason they had switched places to begin with, they were both at a loss for what to do.

"All things considered, I really wonder what on earth this is all about," Amane muttered with a sigh.

Beside him, Mahiru also let out a large breath and then lightly pressed her forehead. "Our situation is so bizarre that, assuming that we aren't living in a dream, it's beyond explanation," she said. "It's not realistic in the slightest. If we went to a doctor, they would likely suspect both of us to be suffering from some sort of brain disease."

"Switching bodies just isn't something you'd think is possible," Amane added. "It's something straight out of fiction." He knew that body swapping was a classic trope in such stories as he enjoyed various forms of entertainment, but nobody would actually expect it to happen in reality.

"This raises questions about where our personalities are anchored. If not the brain, then perhaps the soul? However, since memories are stored in the brain, if a soul was to inhabit another body, would only the soul move? Or, assuming that the personality is linked to the soul, would their memories and personality move with it? To find out the answer to that, wouldn't we first need to prove the existence of the soul?"

"It's tough to say," Amane replied. "All we can say for sure is that we both recognize that we are individuals that originally inhabited different bodies. Though, we can't ignore the slim possibility that we've just been made to think that way."

Memories were fickle. Everyday mistakes in memory were a common occurrence, so it was entirely possible that some sort of mental or physical anomaly could lead to the fabrication or alteration of memories. Additionally, despite the probability being exceedingly low, there was still a chance that both of them had been implanted with false memories, simply leading them to believe that they used to be in each others' bodies. However, this train of thought was a very unsettling one to entertain.

Mahiru shook her head. "Let's not dwell on it too deeply. I don't want to believe that our past memories together were all just fabricated. Everything that

has occurred between you and me, Amane-kun, has definitely happened."

"…I agree." *Our experiences and very existence being completely fake is something I just can't bear to believe.*

Shaking his head to clear his disturbing thoughts, Amane looked up at Mahiru. She offered a troubled smile before softly taking his hand. The feeling of her larger palm enveloping his miraculously eased the tension in his body.

Being in Mahiru's shoes made Amane realize that the physical difference between them was greater than he'd thought, and although not intimidating, his presence was certainly assertive. He wasn't at all scared, however, and this might either stem from it originally being his body or from their mutual understanding of each others' inner selves. At the very least, it brought with it an unexpected sense of security, which left him feeling a profound and indescribable emotion.

Is this how Mahiru always feels?

Lost in the warmth and the gentle pressure of her grip, Amane was brought back to reality when he noticed Mahiru gazing intently at him.

"…What's the matter?" Amane asked, curious about her stare.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how I really do look cute to other people."

"You'd definitely sound like you're blowing your own trumpet if anyone else heard you say that. Not that I'm denying it, mind you."

Hearing such a flabbergasting statement from Mahiru caught him off guard for a moment, but knowing there was no mistake in what she said and that she also had the confidence to back it up, Amane couldn't help but let a faint smile show on his cheeks. Grounded in both a subjective and objective assessment of her appearance, Mahiru's confidence was top-notch. Her self-praise didn't come off as arrogant because she stated it as a mere matter of fact without a hint of boasting. There was also the fact that Amane was aware of how much effort she had invested in herself to reach that point.

"I'm fully aware of my good looks, and I haven't neglected any efforts to maintain that," Mahiru remarked. "However, I was just thinking about how this must be the way I appear from your perspective, Amane-kun."

"Well, you *are* cute. That's just a fact. So, what do you think you look like from my perspective?"

"…From this angle, I look so small and delicate. You're quite well-built, Amane-kun, and from your height, it feels as if I could snap easily."

“Yep, I get exactly what you mean. I’m always a bit anxious about not hurting you whenever I touch you.”

Mahiru had a small build, which naturally resulted in a significant difference in body size when compared to Amane. If he tried to grab her wrist, his hand could cover it completely. She was so delicate that he could snugly envelop her entire body whenever they embraced. Amane was often concerned about applying too much pressure, fearing that a mistake in his strength could easily cause her harm due to her slender frame. However, she wasn’t so thin that she was unhealthy—quite the opposite. Still, her slender limbs did make him somewhat concerned.

“I know how careful you are. You’re always so gentle when you touch me,” Mahiru explained. “…You really are a cautious person, aren’t you, Amane-kun?” When Mahiru softly grasped Amane’s wrist, her fingers easily restrained him. There was no pain involved—she touched him with utmost caution. Yet, it didn’t look like she planned to break her wary approach. “With my current strength, I suppose I could snap my body if I’m not careful.”

“Yeah, please don’t test that. It’d hurt, and you’d probably still feel it even if we swapped back.”

“I’m just kidding, of course. But I do understand how you feel, Amane-kun. From your perspective, I must look quite fragile.”

“Not exactly, but you’re so delicate that you make me want to protect you. I mean, I know that you probably don’t just want to be protected all the time, but as a guy, it’s my instinct to want to be there to protect you…although that’s not to say that we aren’t equals. We are, but that’s a separate matter. Anyway, I hope that made sense.”

“Hehe, I understand.”

Struggling to convey the intricacies of the male heart to a girl, Amane waved his hands about in a flustered manner. Mahiru laughed and gently let go of the wrist she had been holding. Seeing her giggle so freely, in a way that seemed utterly uncharacteristic for the body that used to be his own, Amane froze in place for a moment. After her laughter subsided, Mahiru lowered her face to the same height as his and tilted her head, looking into his eyes.

“Amane-kun, there’s something I’d like to try. Is that okay?” Mahiru asked suddenly.

“Hm? Sure, what is it?”

The moment he agreed, Mahiru wrapped her arms right around his back, and her face, which looked younger than usual, buried itself in his chest. While it was tough to call it *his* chest, Amane couldn't hide his bewilderment as Mahiru nuzzled her face in the mounds adorning his torso.

"…So, what did you want to do?" he asked tentatively.

"Well, I thought I'd try experiencing something you enjoy doing."

cough

Given how bluntly she claimed it was something he enjoyed doing, it should be no surprise that Amane began to cough.

"You like them soft, don't you?" Mahiru then asked.

"…Pretty sure most guys do, if you ask me," Amane returned. He wasn't sure whether it held true for all men, but generally, most men tended to prefer them on the soft side. Especially if the conversation was about their girlfriend.

While she hit the nail on the head, he lacked the experience to declare that preference of his confidently, and it shouldn't be something that Mahiru could be so sure about either. Yet, for some reason, she seemed to assert it with full confidence. The only time Amane mentioned burying his face in Mahiru's chest was in a past conversation, and even then, it was initiated by Mahiru herself, not him.

"True, that might be the case. But don't *you* prefer them that way too?" Mahiru asked again.

"What makes you think that I do!?"

"Huh? Um, well, when you're sleeping or, like yesterday, still half asleep after we nap together, you tend to rest your head on me like that quite often. So I thought it must be because you liked them soft."

"…Tell me you're joking." Despite his strained attempt to deny it, the lack of conviction due to his own uncertainty when half asleep made his reply sound weak.

"It's true. I let you move as you please while thinking how cute it is that you're being so affectionate with me."

"Just push me away from you next time."

"Hmm…you have a strong sense of self-control, so I know that you wouldn't usually do something of that nature. That's why it makes me glad when you relax yourself and act so affectionately while half asleep."

"Normally I wouldn't. I'll be more careful next time." They both welcomed

the gesture deep down, so while it might be fine on the face of it, doing it while fully conscious was another story. The embarrassment would be too overwhelming to do it voluntarily. Besides, recklessly seeking such affection was something Amane found himself incapable of.

"Oh, why? I don't particularly mind," Mahiru added.

"You should, for your own sake."

"If I *really* didn't like it, then I would get angry."

"There you go saying stuff like that again…"

"Hehe. I love it when you fawn over me, Amane-kun."

"What are you going to do if it turns into more than just fawning?"

"What will *you* do, Amane-kun?"

"You big dummy." *She already knows—she's just testing my reaction.* Amane replied with that suspicion in mind as Mahiru brought her body even closer to plop her head in his chest. From within their embrace, a muffed laugh could be heard emanating from his chest.

"…Hmm, still, I can understand how you feel, Amane-kun. Warm, soft, and fluffy things are liked by many, regardless of their age or gender. The warmth and feel of another person's body can be very comforting indeed."

"…Right."

He used to wonder what it felt like to touch your own chest, but it seemed that it simply felt like touching something soft. It might be similar to the pleasant feeling of squeezing a squishy toy or slime.

As the one being embraced, Amane felt a mixture of bewilderment and a slight quickening of his heart from Mahiru's affectionate gesture. Sensing even that heartbeat of his, Mahiru lifted her face and laughed. "Your heart is racing."

"Yours races the same way whenever I do it, just to make that clear."

"Hehe, that goes without saying," Mahiru returned. "…Being by your side makes my heart race as much as it is reassuring. If you touch me like that, of course my heart will begin to beat faster and faster."

With a mischievous smile, Mahiru lifted her face from his chest without showing any sign of reluctance or regret.

Yet, she didn't move away. Instead, she nestled her cheek against his shoulder, rubbing it lightly in an affectionate gesture. This action was oddly endearing, and the fact that Amane found his own body's reaction to be cute, led to a complex mix of feelings within him—a secret that he kept to himself.

It wasn't all that strange for his heart to flutter, given that he found Mahiru's inner self and the way she was more endearing than her appearance. However, seeing his own body act in such a way made it difficult for him to accept those feelings easily.

"…I'm just curious, but objectively, what do you think about your body seeing it now, Amane-kun?" Perhaps trying to alleviate the anxiety in the air, Mahiru leaned in before asking in a hushed voice.

"…Seeing myself from your point of view makes me look pretty intimidating. It must be because you're so short."

"Hmph. I'm just below average in height, that's all."

"Don't sulk… But this is throwing me off a little. It makes me wonder whether that's really my body."

"Throwing you off?"

"Yeah…well, uh, I know it's my body, but the expressions from it look gentler than what I'm used to seeing, maybe because you're the one inside it now. It just doesn't feel like it's me."

Despite it being his own body, the discomfort Amane felt around Mahiru was probably due not only to the gestures, but most importantly, to the vastly different expressions it was making.

Amane was aware that his gaze wasn't particularly friendly, but he couldn't sense any harshness in his gaze from Mahiru, who was currently by his side. On the contrary, he seemed gentle enough to be described as mild-mannered, and he appeared to be a young man with a calm demeanor.

His body seemed as if it wasn't his own. He even found himself marveling at how he could produce such a gentle expression.

I wonder, do the expressions people make change not due to any differences between bodies, but what's inside of them instead? As Amane mulled it over, he found himself unexpectedly on the receiving end of a particularly exasperated look from Mahiru.

"…Amane-kun. By chance, are you not aware of it yourself?"

"Of what?"

"That you tend to smile quite often when it's just the two of us. The look in your eyes is very gentle, and it's clear that you care deeply for me." While explaining and laughing amusingly, Mahiru stroked Amane's cheek, causing him to turn away, slightly embarrassed. Though his trembling lips were surely a

giveaway, he still did not wish to be seen head-on.

"…I don't look that gentle, I can say that."

"You do. So much so, in fact, that it would be unthinkable to see from the person you once were when we first met. Why don't you look at yourself in the mirror?"

Being teased in his own voice was subtly irritating, so with a pout, Amane pinched Mahiru's cheek as a form of protest. However, Mahiru maintained an expression of complete composure.

"Trying to hide your embarrassment, I see?" Mahiru teased.

"Don't you do that a lot yourself?" Amane shot back.

"Let's just say that we're both the same, then."

Faced with an irrefutable smile, Amane ceased his objections and, while chatting with Mahiru calmly for a while, played with her cheeks. The sensation he felt was entirely different from the original softness of Mahiru's body—that is, the body he currently inhabited. It was a firm touch, not only in the cheeks but also across the body he was now touching.

He knew that he had put in the effort, but it was only from an outside perspective that the fruits of his labor could truly be noticed. Welling up within him now was a profound sense of accomplishment and emotion.

Mahiru's obsidian eyes narrowed as she realized the hand that had been playfully pinching her cheek was now slowly trailing down her body. "Is something the matter?"

"…Well, I was just thinking that, yeah…my effort really paid off." His words were soft, and as he spoke, he traced the contours of his original body, feeling the notable bumps of his muscles. Mahiru smiled and her eyes closed part way as if she felt a tickle. "I see," she then murmured a whisper.

"You're referring to your workouts, aren't you? It's true. You have a very firm body now, Amane-kun."

"This is a precious chance for me to see how I look from your perspective."

"Hehe. Now you understand that I'm not lying when I say I find you dependable, right?"

"I knew you weren't trying to flattery me, but to actually see results like this…it makes me happy."

He had acknowledged his own efforts and remained confident in his progress, but being able to verify his hard work objectively confirmed his

improvements more accurately. Whether it was bashfulness or something else, a ticklish sense of joy quietly bubbled up within him.

Though Amane knew better than to get carried away, his cheeks naturally broke out into a smile, and he covered his cheeks with his hands. After keenly watching him, Mahiru placed her hand on his head and, for no apparent reason, began to stroke it gently.

Mahiru's eyes focused intently on his face, as one would admire a child, though her expression remained calm. Her hand continued its gentle exploration without any sign of stopping.

"Why are you patting me?"

"Oh, I just had this sudden urge… How strange. Despite knowing it's my own body, I still find it cute somehow."

"You're just praising yourself for being cute, aren't you?"

"I wasn't trying to… Well, no matter. You're cute. *Very* cute." Although her words might sound like mild praise, there was no hint of mockery in the tone of her voice—just a pure, affectionate adoration. Her gesture was extremely gentle and respectful. As a result, he was placed in quite the embarrassing situation, one in which he could neither push her away nor refuse her patting his head. However, he didn't feel unpleasant, so he let her do as she pleased.

Mahiru, upon seeing Amane like this, broke out into a happy smile. She indulged him by gently stroking his hair with her palm in a comforting manner. He was immersed in a tranquility so gentle and harmonious that it was almost like drifting into a doze, making him momentarily forget even the abnormality of their current situation. However, the sound of a visitor's arrival echoing through the room pulled him back from that warmth into reality.

Since there were neither any visitors nor deliveries scheduled for today, Amane furrowed his brows in wonder at who it could be. Escaping from Mahiru's gentle, yet firm hold, he went to check the intercom. What appeared on the monitor were the two individuals he was most familiar with from school after Mahiru.

"…Itsuki and Chitose are here," Amane said.

"Oh? Did you have any plans with them today?"

"None that I know of, nope. But they know that I'd just be relaxing at home all day, so chances are they invited themselves over."

Under normal circumstances, while Amane would chide them for coming

over so suddenly, he'd inevitably let them in with a resigned sigh while saying, "Guess it can't be helped, eh?" However, the situation was different this time.

Amane and Mahiru were currently in an unimaginable situation where they switched bodies—a scenario any person boasting both a sane mind and common sense would immediately dismiss outright and deem impossible. No matter how close they were as friends, the probability that they would simply laugh it off as a joke was overwhelmingly high. In fact, being misunderstood that way could, in some ways, still be a preferable outcome. Sharing their situation could lead them to be labeled as weirdos or having a few screws loose. Worse yet, it could trigger them to cut off their friendship entirely.

It seemed Mahiru was also aware of this possibility. At some point, she had come to his side, her eyes cast down anxiously.

"…What's our call? We can pretend to not be home if you'd like."

At present, it was still possible to avoid confronting the issue.

They still had time before they had to return to school, and since Itsuki and Chitose were trying to visit unannounced, Amane could pretend that they weren't at home when they happened to pay a visit. It was possible that Amane and Mahiru would return back to normal in the span of a day or two. There was no need to deliberately make a choice with unknown consequences.

What should we do? With that train of thought, Amane looked up at Mahiru. She bit her lip, then spoke, her eyes on the two figures displayed on the monitor.

"…We should greet them," Mahiru decided.

"Are you sure?"

"There's the possibility that we won't return back to normal soon. In that case, it would be wise to find people that can help us. Though, um, as for whether or not they will believe us, I can't say for sure."

While Amane grasped Mahiru's reasoning, he looked into her eyes.

Is it really going to be alright…? Noticing the resolve in her gaze, he dared not voice the question out loud.

He had never doubted their character, but even so, the inherently cautious Amane sought to avoid risks. If Mahiru believed in them, then Amane believed he should believe in them too. In fact, he regretted not being able to trust them right away.

Amane looked Mahiru in the eyes. "…Who knows if they'll believe us, but they'd never go around telling people that we're crazy if they don't. Let's place

our trust in them."

"Okay." They shared a mutual nod of agreement before picking up the intercom to stop persistent ringing.

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"Uh, is this some kind of April Fools joke?"

After inviting the two unexpected visitors into his home and explaining the situation in great detail, the words that spilled from Itsuki's mouth were of utter disbelief.

Amane himself would have likely said the same had their positions been reversed. That was just how fantastical, outlandish, and unscientific their story was.

Utter confusion was written all over Chitose's face as she stared at him blankly. She looked as though she had something to say, but couldn't quite find the right words. To be met with skeptical looks after hearing a story like that was completely expected, so Amane wouldn't let that dishearten him.

When Amane looked Itsuki directly in the eyes, he noticed Itsuki flinch in response. Given the current situation, this might have been expected since, from Itsuki's perspective, it was Mahiru he saw staring at him head on.

"April Fools was ages ago," Amane retorted. "Besides, we wouldn't tell such a bad lie if it wasn't true. There's no way you would believe us."

"Yeah, you're right, but it's just so…*absurd*, you know?" Itsuki replied.

"Totally. We acknowledge that as well." While Amane was ready to admit to the absurdity of the situation, from his and Mahiru's perspective, it was their unmistakable reality. He couldn't take back what he'd said. If Itsuki and Chitose didn't believe them, then that was that. It was possible that this exchange could lead to them cutting ties.

Even if it meant undertaking that risk, Amane and Mahiru had decided to share the details with them. If they still didn't believe them after Amane and Mahiru had explained everything, then they were also prepared to accept that outcome should it arise.

"…We don't have any indisputable way of proving that we swapped bodies. Nor do we expect anyone to believe us based on our word alone. All I can do is insist that we aren't lying."

“I ask the same,” Mahiru chimed in. “I’m not able to provide any concrete evidence, so all I am able to do is ask you to believe us…”

“*Hmm*… Out of the top three people I know that are terrible liars, *two* of them are you guys. I can’t imagine you two trying to make up such a silly lie, and I do wanna believe your story. I just need a bit more convincing, if you will…” Although hesitant, Chitose leaned towards trusting them fairly quickly—and it was apparent that their constant honestly thus far was the key factor.

On the other hand, Itsuki didn’t seem to believe them. More accurately, a look of utter confusion clouded his expression as he tried to process the inconceivable situation.

Chitose’s final line about needing ‘convincing’ took Mahiru by surprise. Worried, she turned to glance at Chitose. “…I see. Well, this might not prove it completely, but please lend me your ear, Chitose-san.”

“Hm? Sure.”

Mahiru beckoned Chitose over, leading her to the corner of the room as though she had some kind of trick up her sleeve. Chitose looked puzzled at first, but her expression gradually changed as she watched Mahiru distance herself from Amane and Itsuki before bending down slightly to whisper something in Chitose’s ear. The look on her face changed swiftly from disbelief to conviction. That said, Chitose’s suspicion seemed to now linger for another reason entirely.

“*Aahh— ...Aaahhh*... I *really* wouldn’t expect Mahirun to tell Amane about something like this, so I’ll believe you. Wait, you being serious right now?” Chitose asked, bewildered.

“Serious,” Mahiru responded.

“*Pfft*, it’s kinda hilarious hearing you say that with Amane’s face and voice.” Seemingly convinced that it was Mahiru on the inside, Chitose, after giggling for a while, added, “It’s okay, Ikkun. They’re being dead serious—don’t you worry.” She laughed amusingly and waved her hand as she came back.

Seeing Itsuki make an expression that said *I knew it*, Amane countered by asking “…Should I whisper some of your secrets, too?”

Amane indeed knew things about Itsuki that Mahiru couldn’t possibly be aware of. This included matters they discussed as men, hidden locations of certain items, and vulnerabilities Itsuki shared only with Amane, all of which Itsuki preferred to keep secret. Even while sharing some of these details could

serve as proof for Itsuki, Amane was still reluctant to do so for the sake of Itsuki's honor and mental well-being. There was, however, always the option of relaying the details back to him in a way only he could hear.

Although Amane didn't particularly want to share anything of that nature, he still made the offer. In response, Itsuki shook his head nonchalantly. "Nahhh, it's fine. Chi's already convinced that you two switched, and I wasn't super skeptical to begin with. More importantly…"

"Yeah?"

"…With how you look and sound right now, I don't want you whispering in my ear."

Right now, Amane was in Mahiru's body. His appearance, his voice—everything—belonged to Mahiru, and while taste varied from man to man, these features could be considered appealing to many.

Even though Itsuki had his beloved girlfriend, Chitose, he was also just like your average man. There might still be moments where his heart might skip a beat. Naturally, knowing that it's Amane on the inside would quickly and entirely quell any such feelings.

"True that," Amane agreed. "I could tell Chitose instead if you want."

"Wouldn't that just expose all my secrets!?"

"Say what? Are you hiding things from me, Ikkun!?"

"I'm not!" Itsuki turned to Amane with a pleading look that told him *Don't you dare say anything*. Amane solemnly nodded, much to Itsuki's relief. Then, Itsuki met Chitose's gaze, her face a stark reflection of her disappointment.

Amane, relieved that Chitose and Itsuki believed them, heaved a heavy sigh without thinking.

Hearing the sound, Itsuki broke out into a grin. "Honestly, you're acting *exactly* how Amane would, so that's why I didn't doubt you that much even at the start."

"Then you should have just believed us from the beginning…though I guess that would be an impossible ask," Amane acknowledged.

"Being quick to believe something this unusual without doubting it at all would be less a measure of friendship and more something else, if you ask me."

"And just asking, but was Chitose's judgment what finally convinced you?"

"Not quite. Hmm…I'm not trying to say that you act crude, but there's a big difference between how you and Shiina-san act. Stuff like your postures, the

way you turn to look at things, how much emphasis you place on your appearances—they're all different. Also, you say my name in the *exact* same way Amane does, but the biggest thing I noticed was that there's absolutely no hesitation when you say my name or look at me."

As looks would have it, Itsuki had indeed been paying close attention after all. He may look frivolous and carefree at first glance, but in truth, he was the type of person who carefully observed those around him. He marched to the beat of his own drum while keeping an eye on what was happening in his surroundings. He must have been closely observing Amane and Mahiru from the very start.

Itsuki gave Amane a relaxed smile after seeing Amane's relief. Itsuki knew that Amane was relieved for a different reason than before, this time because they were helped greatly by Itsuki's keen insight.

"Well, if you really were Shiina-san, you wouldn't do something that dangerous with your legs if I was around, would you?"

"*Amane-kun.*"

"I'm terribly sorry. I'll be careful." Amane had no choice but to apologize profusely after being told the proper way to sit. Seeing this exchange, Itsuki and Chitose burst out laughing and watched Amane shrink back, the experience having seemingly driven home the fact that they had, in fact, switched bodies.

After fixing his posture once again thanks to Mahiru's guidance, Itsuki took another good look at Amane. His gaze seemed to hold a hint of admiration, to which Amane, squinting slightly, returned the look.

"…I dunno man, this just feels kinda…" Itsuki began.

"What?"

"Like, something about this feels incredibly out of place."

"You don't say…" If there was anyone in this world that wouldn't feel something out of place after learning that two of their friends had swapped bodies, then Amane would love to meet such a person. "Something feeling out of place to you is fine by me. If anything, if nothing felt wrong, it would mean that I was acting all refined and graceful like Mahiru."

"Ha ha, like that'd happen."

"Shove it." Amane was already well aware that he didn't act refined, and responded sharply.

Mahiru, on the other hand, maintained a relaxed attitude—her demeanor

didn't exert that same feeling of unease as Amane's.

"Hmm, problem. I want to hug Mahirun but knowing it's Amane inside is putting me off. But then if I hug Amane's body instead, it's a bit…"

"Just don't hug us then."

While Amane's appearance might be that of Mahiru—a woman—his mind remained a man on the inside. He would grow anxious if a woman, especially his friend's girlfriend, clung to him so easily. Anxiety would prevail, not excitement. Additionally, his own girlfriend was right beside him, which would only intensify said anxiety further.

"C'moon. It's okay if it's with Mahirun."

"Yeah, *normally*. You can hug her all you want after we go back to normal."

"Yay!"

"That would still be slightly troubling for me, though!?" Mahiru was visibly flustered knowing that she would be the object of Chitose's enthusiastic show of affection once she returned to normal. Yet, seeing Chitose's innocent delight, Mahiru wasn't actually averse to the idea. She was simply bewildered.

Those two really are super close, Amane thought, taking a sip of the juice that Mahiru had given him earlier. However, for some strange reason, Chitose and Itsuki both turned to look his way. Amane narrowed his eyes and cast a suspicious look, but the two of them acted as if nothing was amiss.

"What *is* it with you two?"

"Well…yeah…you know…" stammered Itsuki.

"You sound like you've got something stuck in your teeth."

"I sort of get what you're trying to say, Ikkun," Chitose chimed in.

"As expected, Chi! You know what's up."

"Seriously, what *is* it?" Amane was at a loss. For some reason, Chitose and Itsuki both seemed to be on the same page about something related to him. As the person in question, Amane was completely clueless and could only force a frown. Mahiru didn't appear to catch on to what the two of them were referring to either, looking at them with a quizzical gaze.

"*Weeell*, you look like Shiina-san right now, don't you?"

"Yeah. What about it?" That statement itself didn't bother Amane in the slightest, since it meant that they believed that he and Mahiru switched bodies. What he was bothered by, however, was what they were thinking. Given that he looked like Mahiru on the outside, they likely had some thoughts or concerns in

mind.

Hurry up and spit it out then, Amane silently urged them on using his gaze.

Itsuki's smirk widened even more. "If I had to explain it, it's like Shiina-san looks different from her usual image as a pure and graceful beauty. She looks icy but also less wary, like an aloof yet nonchalant beauty, which I think is really good in its own right."

"Don't give me any weird looks," Amane warned. "I'll crush you."

"Crush what!?"

"Your *eyes*, obviously! What are you trying to make me do in Mahiru's body?!"

"No, I don't think crushing his eyes is a good idea with Mahirun's body, y'know?"

"A-Aha ha…" Mahiru seemed to realize where the punishment was aimed at, and drew back slightly with a forced smile. Mahiru had once said in the past that she would land a blow on a certain critical area in the event that someone tried to pull something, but having her body used for such attacks while she wasn't in control would surely bother her. Alternatively, there was also the possibility that she was troubled after imagining it, as she was currently living in Amane's body.

Regardless, Amane knew it wasn't a topic that Mahiru particularly enjoyed, so he wanted to usher the conversation along. "Give me a break." Amane gave Itsuki a glare to shut him up as he sunk himself into the sofa.

Next to him, Mahiru furrowed her eyebrows ever so slightly while still maintaining her soft expression.

"And then on the other hand, there's Shiina-san. She looks very…non-Amane-like."

"She's like a very gentle version of Amane. His usual gruffness is nowhere to be seen," Chitose turned to Amane. "You should just smile like that all the time."

"So you're basically saying that I'm normally gruff. I guess I…can't really argue with that, actually."

"See? You even know it yourself."

"I mean, you can't really expect me to be as friendly as Mahiru or Itsuki…"

While it was irrefutable that Amane no longer acted distant or erected barriers between himself and others, he was fully aware that he was far from the

friendliest person out there. If asked whether he was affable, he would give an honest *no* in response. In essence, he wouldn't push others away, but neither would he actively accept them. Amane's passive stance remained even now. Thus, while many people's perception of him being unfriendly has softened, he'd still admit to not being the most approachable or congenial person.

With all that in mind, Amane could only nod his head and agree with her statement. It wasn't an aspect of himself that he was trying to deny.

"If only you softened your expression and let your eyes show, you would look like a warm and gentle young man. I bet you'd be pretty popular if you always looked this way."

"Popularity or whatnot aside, Mahiru might get jealous if that happened, so it's best not to say things like that."

"I–I wouldn't get jealous over something like this."

"You wouldn't, huh?"

"…Would it be okay if I did?"

"You're free to feel however you like, Mahiru. It's better for you to express your emotions freely so long as it doesn't hurt you. I'll try my best not to give you any reason to be jealous, though." Amane's goal was to try to not make her jealous in the first place, but there could be situations where he might end up doing so unintentionally.

While Mahiru may have a strong desire to monopolize him, she wasn't the type of person to use that as an excuse to act in an aggressive manner. Rather, she would instead try to endure and bottle up her feelings. Amane hadn't the slightest intention of being unfaithful, but he wished for her to communicate to him honestly should she become jealous due to something he failed to anticipate. He was willing to try his best to dispel any frustrations or anxiety Mahiru may have, hoping to stay by her side and support her.

Feeling jealous isn't a bad thing in and of itself—even I have my own thoughts about how popular Mahiru is. Having some kind of worry is natural, Amane reasoned. He glanced at Mahiru to see her lower her brows in a bashful manner. She smiled shyly, as though slightly embarrassed.

"Yep, seeing this makes it all too obvious that you've swapped bodies," Itsuki commented.

"That should go without saying." Switching bodies alone wouldn't be enough to also affect their personalities. Given that Itsuki believed that Amane

and Mahiru were acting just like their usual selves, then the switching of their bodies aside, everything else must appear just fine to those around them.

"Seriously though, what are you going to do about it?"

"About what?"

"Your switch. What if you guys don't turn back to normal?"

"Don't say something so scary. We don't even know what caused this to begin with, so don't make it even worse." Had they known the cause, they wouldn't be in such a bind. Understanding the reason could also prove crucial in finding a way for them to switch back.

"So you two were like this when you woke up?"

"Exactly. We slept together last night, and before we knew it, this happened."

"*Oh~?*"

"Quit grinning like that. We didn't do anything strange."

"You didn't, huh?"

Chitose's reply was both understanding and teasing, and Amane couldn't help but frown at her tone.

She definitely has some stupid delusions about what happened now, Amane thought. *Well, there's no point in clearing it up. Desperately trying to correct her would just have the opposite effect.* Knowing this, he simply glared at her without a word.

Then, Amane mulled over what would happen in the event that they never returned to their original bodies. As for him, he would most likely face many struggles while trying to live life as Mahiru—especially considering the sheer level of effort she had maintained for herself. However, Amane wouldn't give up, nor would he leave Mahiru's side.

"Even if we don't turn back, I want to be with you, Mahiru. Burdening you with the responsibility of living my life is something I would feel terribly sorry for, but um…if you don't mind, Mahiru, I want you to stay by my side." Amane looked at her straight in the eyes, speaking out to her in earnest.

Amane never considered leaving her—not even for a moment. But if they failed to rectify their current predicament and Mahiru didn't enjoy seeing her original body, then taking some time apart was an option to be considered.

After processing his words and blinking several times, Mahiru offered him a sheepish smile. "Don't say that… The only one who should apologize is me.

I'm the one who has left you with such a burdensome life to carry on your shoulders. But, I want to be with you too, Amane-kun."

"…I see."

The two of them smiled at one another, relieved from the bottom of their hearts upon confirming that their feelings for each other would remain unchanged.

Witness to their exchange, Itsuki let out a sharp whistle at Amane and Mahiru. "Hey, you two, try not to flirt so hard while we're still here."

"We were just trying to re-coordinate our plans for the future, seeing as a certain someone mentioned a scary possibility."

"If that doesn't count as flirting, then what would…well, whatever."

"Hmm, I was just wondering, but didn't you guys switch while you were sleeping together?" Chitose, who had been silent up until that point, finally spoke. "Then, how about trying the same thing again? Who knows what bizarre reason caused you to switch, but maybe doing it again might let you switch back?"

It was an extremely simple, even obvious suggestion, but it was also one that offered them a glimmer of hope.

After the swap, Amane and Mahiru couldn't just head back to sleep. Confused, they brainstormed ideas and tried to investigate each other's bodies, hoping to find a way back. Sleeping together was an easy thing to test, and neither of them were against sleeping together again. Since it carried the possibility of reverting them back to their original bodies, it seemed like an option worth trying.

"We can place our bets on this small glimmer of hope, but…" Amane tapered away.

"Don't worry! If you still aren't back to normal by tomorrow, Ikkun and I will do our best to cover for you one way or another, okay?" Chitose assured.

"Please hope that things will go well for us."

"Sure, man," Itsuki answered. "All my hope will go your way. If you haven't switched back tomorrow, let's hold another strategy meeting."

Whether the situation could be resolved or not, Itsuki seemed ready to see it through to the end. Without showing any sign of reluctance, he spoke casually and stood up. "I won't lie, some things are just out of our hands. I think the best thing to do right now is take it easy and try to understand each other better. It'd

be bad if any discrepancies or inconsistencies appeared later, so share your worries and concerns while you can."

Amane softly replied, "I understand," to Chitose and Itsuki, who quickly showed their intention to head home. He stood up to see them off.

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After seeing them off, Amane led Mahiru by the hand into the bedroom. It might have been more appropriate to do this at night, but they decided to try sleeping together again as a preliminary test.

It was still bright outside, good enough to be called daytime, but they were already starting to get a little drowsy. All the commotion since the morning had tired them out, and they were both exhausted enough to cuddle up and sleep together if they so wanted. Just like last night, they lied down on the bed together. With both of them wearing strained smiles, they brought their faces closer.

Mahiru looked into his eyes and murmured quietly, "It would be wonderful if we could switch back…" her voice lacking spirit. Her attempt to act calm was simply a façade—beneath it, she still harbored fear about their situation not changing.

"Are you scared about…what's to come?" Amane asked, although slightly hesitant.

"I…am, yes. Honestly, it's scary…but as long as I'm with you, Amane-kun, I'll be okay." Mahiru's initially stiff and awkward smile was quickly replaced with one filled with warm trust. Despite her fear, Mahiru's trust in Amane remained unchanged.

That same sentiment held true for Amane. Believing that he could endure as long as he was by Mahiru's side, he gently placed his hand over hers, intertwining their fingers. Mahiru lightly squeezed back, helping to alleviate the swirling anxiety within him.

Soothed by their shared warmth, Mahiru's black eyes slowly yet surely began surrendering to slumber.

"…It has only been for a brief moment, but…"

"Yeah?"

Right before her eyes closed completely, Mahiru squeezed out a soft

murmur. “I’m glad that I can experience being in your shoes, Amane-kun. Remembering the dream that I had last night made me think that, even if only slightly, it is a valuable experience.” She whispered in a voice so incredibly quiet, yet laden with slight envy.

Amane accepted Mahiru’s not quite serious, yet still faint and modest wish with a smile. He gently stroked Mahiru’s face with his free hand, her black eyes looking like they might fall shut at any moment.

“…But, deep down, I…want to be by your side, as my usual self…Amane-kun…”

“Yeah, I know.” Amane closed the distance even more and gently whispered, “Don’t worry,” in her ear. A wave of relief washed over her, bringing with it the comfort she needed to drift off into sleep. Amane noticed that her eyelids had closed completely, revealing the surprisingly long eyelashes resting over her eyes. He sighed softly, confirming that his breathing had calmed and tension in his face had vanished.

It was clear that past events had cast a looming shadow over Mahiru’s heart. She must have been periodically tormented by memories of such a time, considering that they appeared even in her nightmares. Last night, Mahiru wore an expression that was filled with anxiety. Amane couldn’t bear to leave her on her own during such a delicate moment, which was why he agreed to let her stay the night.

It’s true that I’ve thought about wanting to be in Mahiru’s shoes before.

Although Mahiru usually appears like she has everything under control, there are moments when she is suddenly reminded of the past and shows signs of suffering. Amane desperately wished that he could take her place and bear those painful memories and experiences for her.

Was it because of our wishes that we ended up swapping bodies?

Amane gazed at Mahiru’s tranquil sleeping face as she dozed off before him. Then, he drew a deep breath.

...Even so, I can’t see Mahiru happily giving her burdens to someone else. No matter how hard one struggles, some things just can’t ever be undone.

Mahiru had come to accept her past and didn’t try to act as though it had never happened. She understood that doing so would mean denying a part of herself. For that reason, the anxieties she bottled up inside her would occasionally resurface, resulting in torment.

For Mahiru, it would be far better if we stayed together, living happily while sharing the burden together.

"…Please, let us turn back to normal. I hope that then, I can properly share Mahiru's worries."

Should Amane have to walk through life while living in Mahiru's body, he'd have no choice but to accept that as reality… However, if possible, he wished to return to his original body so that he could be there to support her. He wanted to teach her how to live without feeling intimidated about being herself, and without being tormented by worry and anxiety.

Amane gently pressed his forehead against Mahiru's as he pondered such thoughts. Soon after, he too closed his eyes, and as a torrent of drowsiness claimed him, he surrendered to the slumber.

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A bright light awakened Amane from his sleep, gently piercing through his eyelids.

I don't know why, but my head feels awfully heavy… Amane thought with his mind still in a morning haze. While they desperately tried to resist, Amane finally opened his eyes to find a beautiful river of flaxen hue flowing before him.

"Zzz, zzz." Mahiru let out adorable, quiet breaths as she slept, her long eyelashes trembling occasionally—the sight was one of pure and utter innocence.

Without thinking, Amane let go of the hand he'd been holding and raised his own in front of him. He was met with one of his familiar, rugged hands, which very clearly belonged to him.

I'm ba…wait, was it all a dream?

Upon closer inspection, both he and Mahiru were still in the pajamas they had worn the night before. For their little test nap, Amane and Mahiru had worn their house clothes to bed, so if that had been reality, then the clothes they were wearing should have remained the same. Out of the corner of his eye, Amane glimpsed at the window. Judging by the time and the light spilling in from outside, it appeared to be a regular old morning.

After finally confirming all the details, Amane felt truly relieved.

Thank god. It was just a dream.

It was an eerily realistic dream—one that replicated even all of his regular senses. Amane was worried about the possibility of having to continue living as Mahiru, but now that he learned it was simply a dream, then that was a weight off his shoulders.

Thinking back, Amane hadn't felt the need to use the restroom nor did he feel any sort of physical pain during the time that they switched bodies. That's why now, in hindsight, it was logical for it to just be a dream. From the start, they were all too quick to accept that the swapping of two bodies had genuinely occurred—Itsuki and Chitose believing their story too readily was especially odd. Normally, one would be more skeptical and worry first about the possibility of a mental illness.

The idea of swapping bodies was, after all, a preposterous one. In modern Japan, where science, technology, and medical knowledge have advanced by leaps and bounds, no one in their right mind would immediately believe such a tale.

The way things had panned out was so far-fetched and convenient that Amane was further convinced that the swap was simply a dream. Both so incredibly realistic and *un*realistic at the same time, Amane was left with a profound feeling to digest as he reflected on the dream.

"*Phew.*" As Amane heaved a sigh of relief, he noticed that Mahiru, who had been sleeping beside him, was now slowly opening her eyes. Lying by Amane's side was indeed Mahiru—and *not* himself. Although she still had sleepy eyes, her consciousness seemed to rouse quickly once she caught sight of Amane. Her usually large eyes widened so much that they seemed to be overflowing. Her gaze was filled with surprise, so perhaps she had forgotten that she had slept next to him last night.

They remained in silence for a while, their gazes focused on each other. Then, at the exact same time, they slowly began to speak.

"So it was a dream, huh."

"I see. So it was a dream."

They both looked at one another and, unable to stay quiet any longer, simultaneously uttered the same line before breaking out into laughter.

"Huh?"

No Matter What You Look Like...

Included in the Volume 8.5 Special Edition Booklet

"(Pre-Release) — Please send any mistakes or confusing lines to Indi in DMs."

"Amane-kun, please help me!"

Recently, Amane had been diligently studying and training, so he decided that given it was his day off, he'd earned himself some time to lie in. Even after waking up, he remained dozing in bed, his mind drifting between consciousness and sleep. But it was during such a lazy time that Mahiru, the girl he cherished most, leapt onto him with a scream-like cry for help.

Despite his lazing around, it was still early morning. Amane hadn't at all expected Mahiru to visit him so early, especially having barged into his bedroom without so much as knocking. Taken aback, Amane gazed at Mahiru, who was half-crying and looking down at him. His drowsiness was instantly blown away.

Knowing that Mahiru would never intrude or launch herself onto him in such a manner unless something serious had happened, he blinked exaggeratedly. When he looked at her face again, he felt a strong sense of discomfort—her usually adorable face was the same as ever, forever and always cute, but now, the *level* of cuteness seemed even more intense now than ever before.

Amane instantly noticed something atop her head. They were triangular in shape, and had the same color as her hair. They resembled the ears of the animal Amane adored so much.

Maybe I'm just dreaming or something? Amane wondered to himself, making the connection that they were on *Mahiru's* head. As she remained on top of him, he brought her into a close embrace and stroked her head, experiencing a sensation that was both oddly soft and warm. He could feel them pulsate as he

cautiously touched them with his fingertips, a tell-tale sign that they weren't just a toy.

"Good…*morning*?" Amane cautiously asked. Still whimpering on his chest, Mahiru slowly looked up, her caramel-colored eyes moist.

This is *real life, right?*

"Amane-kun, what should we do? Wh-When I woke this morning, these ears just…"

"…They're the real deal, aren't they?"

"I certainly don't have the time or the skills to prepare such a realistic headband just for a morning joke!" Mahiru cried out in a somewhat desperate tone. Behind her, a tail, one much thicker than a normal cat's, swayed faintly as she spoke. The fur on her tail appeared to be bristling, most likely a natural reflection of her distress.

Is this real too? Amane instinctively reached for her tail, and Mahiru's body promptly trembled in response. The smooth texture was just as pleasant as touching her hair, if not more so.

"…Am I dreaming?" he muttered in a somewhat casual tone, hugging Mahiru as she continued to press her head up against him. From within his arms, she faintly murmured, "Please don't just assume it's all a dream!"

Mahiru gradually brought her face closer to his and glared at him from point-blank range, showing him a displeased look. Paired with the twitching of her eyes, she looked just like a sulking cat.

This is too adorable…

Despite the absurdity of the situation, Amane found the sight of Mahiru with cat ears and a tail so incredibly endearing—so much so that his feelings of confusion and affection were more pronounced than his panic and anxiety.

Mahiru's breathing had now become slightly rough, which made her emotions easier to pick up on than usual. This, however, only served to enhance her cat-like appearance even more, and Amane couldn't help but cover his mouth. "…Sorry, let me apologize first. I know this is a serious situation and all, but, um, th-this is just *too* cute."

Amane, fearing that it might seem like he was taking the emergency lightly, confessed his honest feelings to her. At this, Mahiru let out a clearly displeased "*Hmph*," but her expression had softened considerably compared to before.

"I really am sorry." Sincerely, Amane apologized once more, now sitting up

with Mahiru still in his arms. As she slid down onto his lap, Mahiru puffed her cheeks slightly before delivering Amane's chest a light headbutt.

"…I'm not against you admiring how I look, but we really must think of a plan for what to do next."

Mahiru had said that with a slightly pouty attitude, though it was clear that she wasn't seriously angry with him. Even though he felt somewhat guilty about it, Amane couldn't help but find that her swaying tail was still adorable.

"L-Let's confirm the current situation, shall we?"

Despite her previously sour mood, Mahiru unconsciously snuggled up to Amane with an innocent charm that was almost too adorable to handle. He held back a groan, restraining himself to merely expressing his affection through gentle strokes as he gazed down at her.

Mahiru still had a cat tail and ears. Sitting on Amane's lap, she seemed to notice his gaze and leisurely swayed her tail.

"…So, this was how you looked when you woke up, right?" Amane began.

"Correct. I don't recall noticing anything unusual yesterday," answered Mahiru. "Besides, how would anyone know why they suddenly started growing cat ears and a tail out of nowhere?"

"Yeah, that's true." In modern Japan, the idea of suddenly growing cat ears and a tail was beyond the realm of possibility. The sensation he felt when he touched the tail, as if there were bones inside, made it clear. The notion that bones could grow and protrude from the human body in just a day was virtually impossible.

The real question was why such a sudden change had occurred in the first place.

This isn't some fantasy world, so why? Amane thought to himself. He looked down at Mahiru again, pondering the situation.

Feeling his gaze, Mahiru's pointy ears, covered in fur that matched her hair color, twitched slightly. While they seemed at home on her head without any glaring oddity, the mere fact that such ears existed on a human head was quite unsettling. However, thanks to Mahiru's glamorous facial features, they further added to her charm, making her appear even more endearing.

"…Given how surreal this situation is, I'm going to ask something equally as surreal," Amane prefaced his question. "Do you recall doing anything recently that might have possibly angered a cat?"

“If we include people, then quite possibly, yes. However, I personally would never do anything to a cat that would warrant it cursing me.”

Put simply, Mahiru loved animals. But even if she didn’t, she still wasn’t the kind of person who would inflict harm on them. If she found certain animals intimidating, she would typically avoid them rather than confront or provoke them.

“Actually, I haven’t encountered any cats at all recently. Not even a single one since our visit to the cat café, I believe.”

“Yeah…”

They hadn’t run into any stray cats in the neighborhood recently either, so Mahiru had virtually no interaction with any cats since then. While she might encounter them at an acquaintance’s house, Mahiru was not inclined to enter other people’s homes, making even that possibility equally as unlikely.

What caused all of this, then? With that thought in his mind, Amane observed Mahiru as her ears softly flopped downwards. She seemed lost in thought, her hand lightly resting on her mouth and her gaze wandering downwards as if deep in contemplation.

“What’s the matter?” questioned Amane.

“Ahh… It’s nothing.”

“Even if it’s just a small detail, you can share it.” Amane watched her intently, hoping to explore even the slightest possibility if she had any clue. Mahiru looked up at him with a hesitant expression, as if struggling to decide whether to share her thoughts.

“…Yesterday, we were watching that TV program about cats, weren’t we?” Mahiru finally said.

“Oh, yeah, we were,” Amane recalled.

After last night’s dinner, they had casually turned on the TV, and it happened to be showing an animal program featuring a special segment on cats.

“And you were talking about how cute you found them, and how you wanted to pet them for comfort, weren’t you?” Mahiru continued.

“Yeah, I did say that.”

“And then, I agreed with you.”

“…Right, you did,” Amane said, recalling the conversation.

What’s she getting at, exactly? Amane gazed at Mahiru, who then awkwardly cast her eyes downward, seemingly troubled by something.

“I agreed, yes, but there was actually a thought that had crossed my mind at the time,” Mahiru began hesitantly.

“Oh yeah?” Amane prompted her to continue.

“That being, ‘*I also wish to be adored by Amane-kun in a similar way.*’”

Stunned, Amane froze at her words as Mahiru buried her face in his chest, seemingly unable to contain herself any longer. Her tail, whether acting against or in accordance with her will, swayed gently and elegantly, occasionally wrapping itself around Amane’s arm beside her.

Silence fell between them. Perhaps out of embarrassment, Mahiru’s human ears had turned a deep shade of red.

“…Wait, don’t tell me…” Amane connected the dots.

“S–Surely not, right…?”

Amane chose not to comment on the quiver in her voice. Instead, he hugged her tightly, slowly stroking her back. Through the gaps in her hair, he caught a glimpse of her eyes looking up at him, soft and seemingly melted with emotion, which made his heart skip a beat.

Her gaze was filled with shyness, but there seemed to be a flicker of expectation hidden within, exuding a seductive, tantalizing allure. Realizing that reacting to this in their current position would be inappropriate, Amane quickly dismissed the fleeting desire that had surfaced in his mind and softly set Mahiru down.

“S-So, for now,” Amane said, trying to regain his composure, “let’s just have breakfast, shall we? I need to sort out my thoughts.”

“O-Okay.”

Fortunately, Mahiru seemed unaware of Amane’s momentary internal struggle. She nodded obediently at his suggestion, her ears still twitching slightly like before.

“…I was just wondering about this, but can you eat normal food? There are some things we eat that cats actually find toxic, like food with lots of salt can be harmful to them.”

“I still have a human body…although it now has these ears and a tail attached to it. My senses are all, I believe, still human. If they weren’t, I wouldn’t be able to perceive colors in quite the same way, and if I gained the senses of a cat while retaining human perception, I would be overwhelmed by all the smells and sounds around me,” Mahiru explained.

“Ah, right, that does make sense,” Amane acknowledged her point.

He was aware that a cat’s vision wasn’t as adept at perceiving colors as vividly as a human’s. Had Mahiru, who had always experienced the world with human vision, claimed that she was perceiving everything normally now, it must have meant that there were no issues with her senses.

“I shall prepare our food, then.” Mahiru, embracing her role in preparing breakfast, energetically got off of the bed, ready to start the task.

Her movements seemed more graceful and fluid than usual.

So it looks like there are some other side effects, after all, Amane thought. Watching Mahiru’s long, flaxen hair sway as she moved, Amane felt a quiet sense of relief. He then followed suit, shuffling off the bed to join her.

✧ + ✦ + ✧

“…Wow, it really is growing out of you, huh.”

For breakfast, just to be on the safe side, they avoided adding ingredients like onions and raw eggs, which were harmful to cats. After finishing their meal, Amane once again observed Mahiru’s appearance, still processing the surreal change.

Seated on the sofa, Mahiru appeared to have regained her composure as she returned to her usual calm expression. However, her ears and tail were actively moving, seemingly more expressive of her emotions than her face. Amane carefully examined the base where the ears met her scalp—they were indeed wholly attached into her head. He didn’t dare try to inspect where the base of her tail emerged from, considering it inappropriate, but according to Mahiru, it was also firmly attached to her body.

Incidentally, Mahiru had opted for loose-fitting pants today, as her tail apparently interfered with the fabric of more traditionally-sized clothing. The occasional glimpse of skin as she moved distracted him, and Amane found himself hoping they could resolve this unusual situation soon.

“I am able to feel pain from my tail, just so you know,” Mahiru warned.

“That pretty much means they’re real, then. But still…”

After looking closely, Amane could see clearly that Mahiru’s ears and tail were indeed appendages growing from her body. Furthermore, her reactions

when he touched those areas made it evident that they also had nerves.

When Amane gently brushed her tail with his fingertips, the soft, delicate, and slightly moist fur gave a pleasant sensation. Mahiru didn't seem to mind being touched there—she just looked ticklish and reacted with a calm demeanor.

"…It's really warm and fluffy," Amane observed, being especially gentle, careful and delicate in his touch, knowing that her tail was especially sensitive due to its nerves. He was more careful than when he usually caressed Mahiru, making sure not to cause any discomfort. Mahiru was still allowing him to do as he pleased, quietly allowing him to continue. In fact, she even narrowed her eyes contentedly and let out a purring sound, making her reactions much more buoyant and cat-like than usual.

Amane tenderly stroked her head with his free hand and then slid his fingers down to her cheek. Mahiru, seemingly in high spirits, happily pressed her cheek up against his hand and let out a sweet purr. Unaware of her own actions, her face radiated sheer bliss, remaining unchanged.

As Mahiru began to act a little more needy, she nuzzled her cheek against Amane's chest several times, making him struggle to suppress a cough.

Bonus Illustration from translator:
Edit by u/Iviera

I wanna take a pic of this so bad… Amane thought. *Actually, maybe a video too.* His beloved girlfriend, the one he cherished the most, was now endearingly adopting elements of his favorite animal and cuddling up to him. And, in his eyes, there was nothing more precious.

Mahiru was leaning against him while purring gleefully, just like a large cat. Amane was conscious of the silly grin on his face, but was relieved to see that Mahiru was too focused on being pampered to notice his change in expression. He was confident that if she happened to catch a glimpse of his face now, it might even creep her out.

Regardless, he continued to affectionately stroke Mahiru, unable to stop himself from doting on her. However, noticing that she was becoming overly limp and almost melting under his touch, he thought he might have gone just a little overboard with it and quickly stopped. Yet, as he did so…

stare

Peering up at him with wide, dewy eyes, Mahiru gave him a look as if to ask *Are you stopping already?* Amane couldn't bring himself to go against those pleading, upturned eyes and involuntarily uttered a "*Nnnh…*"

"In any case, it's pretty clear that you're taking after a cat," Amane spoke slowly and calmly in an attempt to regain his composure, to which Mahiru's eyes shot wide open in response. Upon noticing that her eyes were still that of a human's, he felt a wave of relief as he stroked her head soothingly. In response, her cheeks relaxed even more into an expression of clear contentment.

"Does it feel good?" Amane asked, composing himself. In response, it seemed Mahiru finally realized exactly what she was doing—her face instantly turned a deep shade of red, as if it had just hit boiling point.

"…You were enjoying yourself there, weren't you?" Mahiru returned, a tinge of disbelief in her tone.

"Well, I suppose. It's just that you were reacting so affectionately, so I couldn't help myself."

"Geez!" Mahiru lightly slapped Amane's thigh, but the attack dealt no damage. Had she used her nails instead, he might have felt some level of pain, but she was careful only to use the palm of her hand. Though her nails now seemed somewhat sharper than usual since becoming more cat-like, unlike an

actual cat, she couldn't retract them, so she was likely being mindful of how she moved.

"…P-Please try not to treat me like a cat too much, okay? Geez."

"But you were the one acting all affectionate and stuff, so…" Amane pointed out, to which Mahiru silently used his thigh as a makeshift drum. "My bad. What I was seeing was just too adorable not to."

"…When you say that, are you talking about my cat ears being adorable?"

"No, I was talking about *you* being adorable *with* those cat ears."

"If that's the case, then I suppose it can't be helped."

Amane told Mahiru that it was *her* who was cute, not just the cat ears, which seemed to please her. Her cheerfully wagging tail showed her good mood, causing Amane to feel a slight worry about how easily swayed and straightforward she was becoming since taking on the form of a cat.

"You're becoming easier and easier to convince, and it's worrying me slightly," Amane muttered.

"Did you say something?"

"No, not a word."

It seemed that Mahiru had indeed heard him, as she briefly shot him a glare. However, when Amane gently stroked her, seemingly appeasing her, she backed down and allowed him to pet her. Relieved, Amane continued to move his palm over her until he felt her mood had fully improved.

After a while of being pampered, Mahiru suddenly came to her senses, straightening her back with a snap. However, her tail, as if not ready to let him go, curled around Amane's arm. This suggested that, perhaps subconsciously, she might have wanted to continue being spoiled.

"What should we do now?" Before anything else, they needed to discuss their next steps.

"…This goes without saying," Mahiru began, "but I can't attend school while looking like this."

"Yeah, that's out of the question," Amane agreed. If Mahiru suddenly showed up at school with cat ears and a tail, it would certainly cause a stir. Any passersby would instantly wonder what could have happened to her body. These weren't just fake accessories made for a joke—they were bonafide cat ears and a tail, which made the situation worse.

"I'm certain that people will be quick to ridicule me or claim that I'm just

trying to seek attention."

"Whether you'd be ridiculed or not aside, they'll definitely have their own things to say about it all, that's for sure."

Given that not everyone at school viewed Mahiru's presence in a positive light, she would likely become an easy target for students who harbored resentment towards her.

Mahiru understood this herself and drooped her ears in a dejected manner. "I wasn't anticipating this…" she then said. In an attempt to comfort her, Amane stroked her head, and she welcomed his touch. Well, more accurately, she voluntarily rubbed herself against him, nuzzling closer while purring.

"*...Ah—!*" However, she quickly regained her composure soon after, a gasp escaping her lips. To Amane, the sight of her attempting to control herself was irresistibly cute, and he couldn't help but snicker. This prompted another glaring look from Mahiru in response.

"More importantly," she backtracked, "if people discovered that I suddenly sprouted ears and a tail, it would spark a huge commotion."

"Yeah, it'd be a total disaster if some fool found out and it made the rounds online…" Amane imagined the potential chaos.

"That's the last thing I would want to happen."

"Agreed. Even I wouldn't be in the clear." The possibility of his girlfriend becoming the object of humiliation was no laughing matter.

Mahiru pressed her ears down and furrowed her brows slightly. "…I just wanted to be pampered by you, not to actually turn into a cat like this," she lamented.

"Just say the word, and I'll pamper you to your heart's content," Amane offered earnestly.

"It's embarrassing to say it directly!" Her tail perked up as she spoke, perhaps embarrassed to admit it. The expression she wore suggested that she was also slightly anxious.

Given her nature, Mahiru's hesitation likely stemmed from more than just embarrassment. She probably harbored concerns about whether it was truly acceptable for her to seek his affection or if she was being a bother to him, leading her to bottle up those doubts inside her as opposed to voicing them.

From Amane's perspective, there was nothing bothersome about being relied on or pampered by his adorable girlfriend—far from it. In fact, he wished for

her to lean on him even more. He wasn't trying to make her dependent on him, but whatever Mahiru happened to seek from him, he was more than willing to give to her.

The way she can be so reserved is both her strength and *her weakness at the same time*, Amane thought, a little worried. He then gently placed his palm on her flaxen hair.

"I want to accept everything about you. That's why, Mahiru, I'd be delighted if you let me know anything you'd like me to do, okay? It can be anything, big or small."

"U-Uuu…"

"I won't be put off or think it's weird. Wouldn't you like it if I could pamper you even more?"

"I-I would, yes, but…"

"And I feel the same way. Accepting my partner's affection is the least I can do."

"Perhaps you can only say that because you don't know how needy I can really be?"

"Look…do I really seem like someone who isn't prepared to fully accept your needs?" Feigning offense at the thought, Amane gave her a deliberately exaggerated look of disbelief.

Now in a panic, Mahiru vigorously shook her head and fervently retorted, "That's not it at all!" Seeing her earnest response, Amane couldn't help but smile softly.

Needless to say, Amane didn't actually believe that Mahiru thought so little of him. Her hesitance towards being pampered stemmed merely from her own anxieties and concerns.

Thinking about it, Amane realized that after turning into a cat, Mahiru had been much more open in showing her affection. Her ears and tail exaggeratedly conveyed her emotions, and her behavior was more overt than usual. The way she acted on her desires, which she usually tried to keep under wraps, was a side of her that Amane found irresistibly adorable.

"You've become so easy to read now, Mahiru."

Quick to realize that he was referring to her ears and tail, Mahiru frowned. "Do you prefer me with cat ears, Amane-kun?"

"Hmm, I guess it doesn't really matter to me either way."

“Doesn’t really matter…”

“Ah, wait. I don’t want you to misunderstand. Let me rephrase that.”

Worried that it might sound like he didn’t care, Amane hurriedly looked into Mahiru’s face, noticing a slightly uneasy expression. He smiled at her, hoping to dispel any worries his words might have caused.

“Mahiru, I like you for who you are, so it’s more accurate to say that I don’t prefer any version of you over the rest. When you think about it, these cat ears are just another part of you, right? And that’s why I like them. If some stranger had them, I’d probably just think it’s kind of cute or impressive, but that’s about it.”

Amane wouldn’t automatically like someone with cat ears just because he liked cats. Whether he found someone cute or thought the ears suited them might vary based on how the individual looked, but that wouldn’t necessarily equate to affection or fondness for the person themself.

Although she now had cat ears, Amane still only doted on Mahiru because it was her. Had it been anyone else, he likely wouldn’t have been nearly as interested as he was.

“If you aren’t a fan of having them, then naturally, I’d also prefer that you didn’t,” Amane explained. “But if you would rather have them, then I’m willing to accept that too.”

While it seemed clear as day that Mahiru would prefer not to have them, Amane’s priority was to respect her feelings without imposing his own views. Despite finding her cat ears utterly adorable, he only felt that way because they were on her. He wasn’t about to rejoice over her new appendages if they made her uncomfortable.

“Anyway, if this is permanent, I’ll just have to work hard and provide for us, right? Let’s try to find a solution together,” Amane proposed. If the cat ears turned out to be a permanent change rather than a temporary one, Mahiru might face significant challenges in living her life as usual.

In the truest sense, she might not be able to live freely without any worries. Amane knew this and was determined to support her as much as possible. Even if it meant Mahiru could no longer step foot outside the house, he was ready to earn enough so they could live comfortably together.

Of course, the best outcome for both of them would be if things returned to normal. Still, Amane wanted her to know that, regardless of the situation, he

would never leave Mahiru to face it all alone. As he shared these feelings to her, looking at her earnestly, Mahiru's eyes welled up with tears before slowly closing again.

"…Amane-kun, you dummy."

"M-My bad."

"That's not what I meant. *Dummy*." After uttering these affectionate, hardly insulting words in a delicate voice, Mahiru lunged at Amane. Her forceful embrace sent him tumbling back onto the sofa.

Caught off guard and utterly surprised, Amane found Mahiru collapsing onto him without any hesitation, cuddling close like a pet seeking affection from its owner. Though there was a hint of demureness and hesitation in her expression, Mahiru gazed into Amane's face from up close. Then, with a shy flutter of her long eyelashes, she lowered her eyes, her cheeks likely warming with a blush.

"…I'm still a bit worried, so is it okay if you pamper me a bit more?"

"Of course." In response to Mahiru's full-hearted display of affection, Amane relaxed his cheeks, careful not to overstimulate her. He accepted her kiss, which seemed to convey to him both her anxieties and her warmth. Whether this bodily warmth was a result of her cat-like transformation or from her own embarrassment remained unclear. All Amane could tell was that Mahiru was seeking comfort from him, showing her affection and desire for his presence.

Mahiru's tongue briefly flicked across his lips during their kisses, giving Amane an odd sensation. It felt distinctly rougher and hotter than usual.

Oh, right. Cats don't have the same kind of tongues as we do. They're barbed, Amane thought, smiling faintly.

Mahiru, likely wondering if she was being laughed at, peered up at him. Quick to catch on, Amane slowly stroked her head with a smile. Her displeasure seemed to fade immediately as she meekly accepted the touch of his hand. She then nuzzled back into his chest, listening keenly to the sound of his heartbeat. Feeling his heart beating even faster, Amane tried to calm his slightly quickened pulse so as not to be noticed. At the same time, he continued to caress her just like before.

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Amane slowly opened his eyelids, realizing he had unintentionally fallen asleep. The comfortable warmth and weight on him must have drifted him into sleep.

Mahiru, who had fallen asleep on top of him, remained in a state of complete relaxation and trust, just as she had been before he lost consciousness. It was then that he noticed something for the first time: the triangular appendages that had sprouted from Mahiru's head were gone without a trace. Amane nearly gasped at the sight. Concerned that making a loud noise might wake her up, he managed to suppress the voice rising from his throat and instead intently studied the top of her head where her cat ears had once been.

Her tidy and stunning flaxen hair was all that was there. The top of her head was complete with her human hair crown visible and no signs of anything that wasn't human. Even where the cat ears had been, there was now only her natural hair.

Was it all just a dream? Amane wondered. Mahiru's appearance, so ordinary as if nothing had ever happened, made Amane ponder such a thought as he gazed at her sleeping soundly on top of him.

Her sleeping face, free from the anxieties weighing on her mind, was the very picture of serene slumber. When Amane stroked her back carefully so as to avoid waking her, she made a ticklish expression and then relaxed once more, showing him an expression of pure content as she continued to sleep. Observing this, Amane felt incredibly happy and gently curved his lips into a smile.

"…No matter what happened, I was prepared to take responsibility," Amane whispered as he gazed at Mahiru's innocent sleeping face. As she lay there nestled in his arms, Amane could have sworn he heard a faint "*Meow*" from somewhere nearby, a sound indistinguishable from that of an actual cat.

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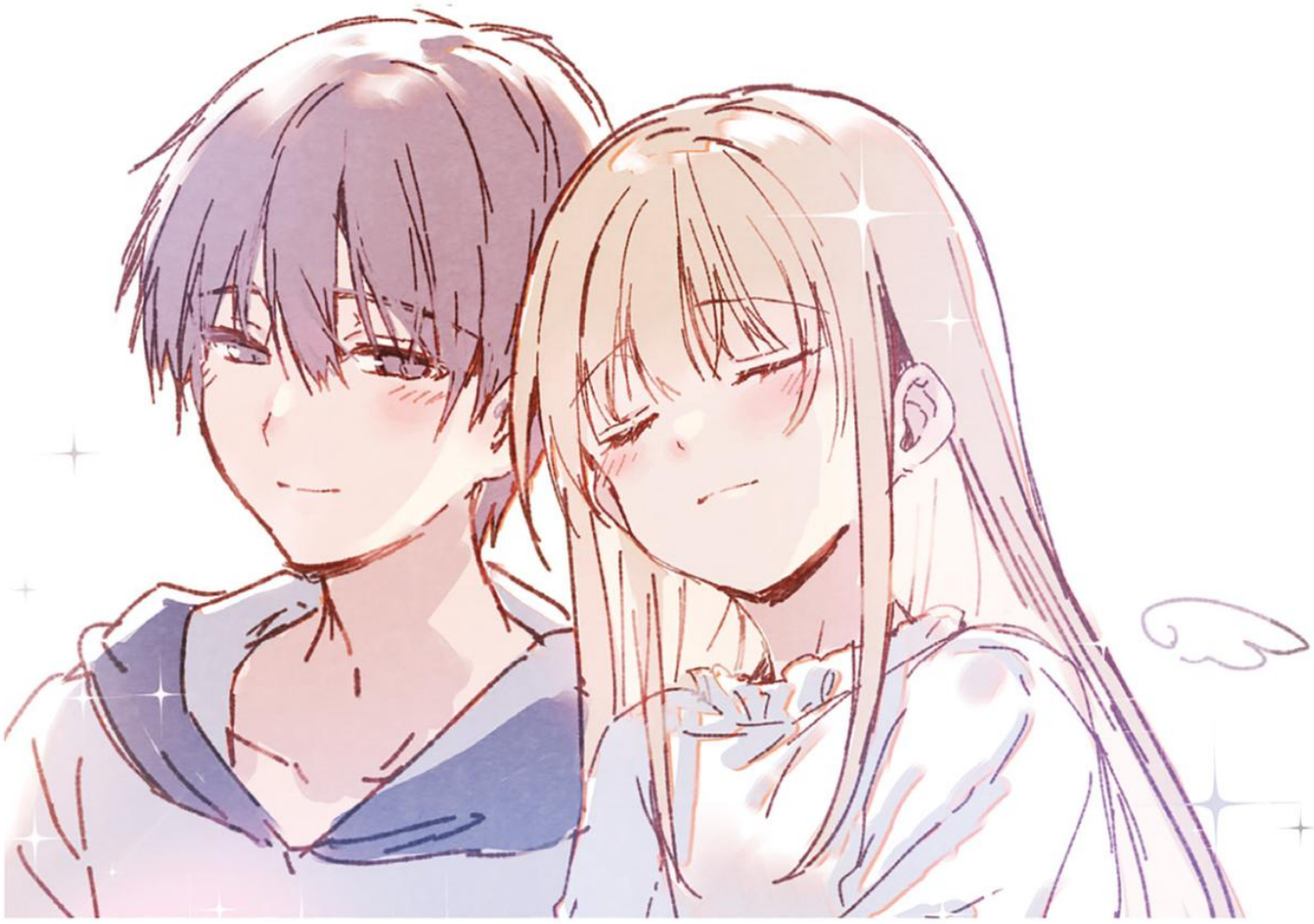

She is the neighbor angel, I am spoilt by her.

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